

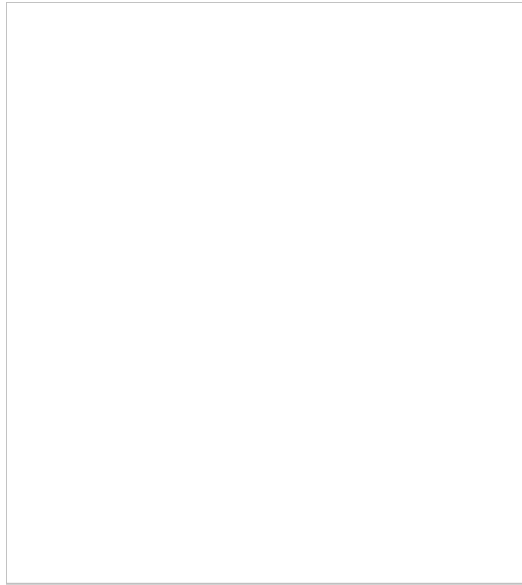


THE TERROR MOUNTS, THE RESISTANCE
GROWS, THE SAGA CONTINUES...



EAST COAST CRISIS

Howard Weinstein and A.C. Crispin



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Prologue

Journey's End

Ghostly and gray, the small planet rode the loneliest reaches of its solar system, reflecting only the dimmest glow from its distant sun. Five billion miles away, its captor star burned bright and yellow, bathing its closer planets in warmth—even, in the case of one blue-green sphere, life-giving warmth. But this far out, its immensity diminished by sheer distance, it was just another star in the darkness, barely larger and brighter than others studding the void.

Most of the crew aboard the immense ship took little notice of the gray planet except to verify that the computer-controlled engines compensated automatically for its minor gravitational tug. The ship had crossed nearly nine light-years of featureless space—only the crew members posted at the navigation stations actually saw the icy worldlet, but several of them responded to its image on their screens with relief. It was a psychological boost to witness tangible proof that

their mission had advanced so much that they were actually entering the system containing their long-awaited goal.

The ship's command center was a dim, silent place. Most of the functions of the gigantic ship were controlled by computers—personnel had little to do except monitor and verify that the computers were performing their functions correctly.

The ship's second-in-command sat perched on the commander's seat, stiff-backed and haughty. Her blonde hair was pulled into a severe ponytail, a utilitarian style that didn't

detract from her obvious beauty. It was a cold, brittle beauty, though—ice-blue eyes, lips drawn into a thin line, her face a sculpture of sharp-edged planes and angles.

She glanced down at the navigational, engineering, life-support, communications, and weapons-control stations arrayed before her like the spokes of a giant half-wheel, then focused on one of her subordinates, sitting at the communication console just to the right of the commander's station. The junior officer absently ran a hand through her reddish-brown hair as she scanned her readout screen.

"Jennifer," the command officer said, her voice reverberating in the near silence.

The officer addressed did not respond. "*Jennifer!*" the blonde officer repeated sharply.

This time the younger female started and turned, her fingers digging into the arms of her seat. "I—I am sorry, Angela," she said, careful with her pronunciation of the superior officer's name. "I still have trouble remembering my assigned name. I'll be more alert next time. What did you wish?"

Angela glared. "I wished nothing, Jennifer. I have been instructed to verify that each officer is fully prepared for his or her role in meeting our hosts-to-be. That preparedness includes a thorough familiarity with assigned names. You've had the same training period to learn yours as the rest of us. Your lapse wouldn't be forgivable in a bottom-ranked technician—it's totally unacceptable in the officer third in command of this ship. I doubt you've risen to that rank by suffering

memory lapses."

"I said I was sorry," Jennifer said softly. "It won't happen again, Angela."

Angela narrowed her eyes warningly. "It's true that you're awfully young to be taking on this level of responsibility. In fact, I pointed that out to the Commander when he—"

"To *Roger*," Jennifer interrupted, her voice still quiet, but firm now.

"What?" Angela's attack had been diverted. For a moment she drew a blank.

"To *Roger*," Jennifer repeated. "You said, 'the Commander.' *His* assigned name is Roger—or had *you* forgotten?"

Angela stiffened in her seat, but any rejoinder she might have made was forestalled as boot heels rang on an overhead

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catwalk and the subject of their discussion appeared. The crew acknowledged his presence, but his wave cut short their formal salutations. He sat down in the seat Angela automatically vacated; his eyes, in his weathered, handsome countenance, focused on Jennifer. "Communications standing by, Jennifer?"

"Yes, *Roger*," she said, her glance never wavering from his green eyes. "I'm keying in now."

Her quick touches displayed the information on the screen above their heads, magnified for easy reading. "It seems as though we're about ready," he commented.

"Not in my opinion, sir," Angela said, determined to make her opinions known.

"What do you mean, Angela?" the Commander asked, his face creasing as he frowned, then smoothing as he lifted his fingers to touch the worry lines consideringly.

"I'm concerned that not all of our crew are properly prepared for our mission,

sir," Angela said, her eyes flicking coldly to Jennifer.

Roger looked at his officers. "The test ratings on this ship are comparable with the highest in the Fleet. Do you agree with Angela, Jennifer?"

"Well, no, Roger," the younger officer said, moving up to stand beside him and Angela and lowering her voice so that it would not carry to the rest of the bridge personnel. "That is, not exactly. I do agree that we may not be as fully prepared as we should be. Our strategy is based almost entirely on long-range surveillance and monitoring of informational and entertainment broadcasts. In many ways, this is a world still completely alien to us. And our mission ..." She hesitated. "The details of the Great Leader's plan are still not clear to many of the officers, Roger. I perceive this to be a possible weak link in our strategy—that so many of our people don't fully realize our purpose, yet will still be interacting with the native population."

The Commander was a bit surprised to hear such apparent pessimism in Jennifer's precise assessment, but nodded thoughtfully. Angela glared at him before whirling to face Jennifer. "How dare you question the Leader's wisdom? Are you privy to things he doesn't know?"

"No," said Jennifer defensively. "It's just that—"

Angela cut her off with an angry hiss. "It seems to me that *you* don't have the faith and courage to devote to this mission, Jennifer! How can you question the goals of a mission designed to insure the very survival of our civilization?"

Roger stopped any retort from the younger officer with an upraised hand. "We're tired. This has been a long voyage—for all of us. I know each of us is concerned about what we're going to encounter here. I appreciate both of your opinions, but my command judgment is that we—and the Fleet as a whole—are prepared to fulfill Our Leader's expectations of us." He gestured at the communications console. "Jennifer, we will need your services in just a few minutes."

As the younger officer nodded and resumed her post, the Commander turned to the navigation station, his eyes fixing on the main viewscreen. "Navigation status?"

"Preprogrammed coordinates have initiated deceleration maneuver number three. Estimated time to Earth orbit—six hours."

Roger nodded, carefully keeping his face from reflecting his perplexity. Mentally, he went through the laborious process of converting the local time—"hours"—to his own people's time units. After a second he nodded slightly. *Soon*, he thought, *soon* . . .

He turned back to the viewscreen to see the featureless face of the gray planet receding. It revealed neither sign nor omen nor comment on the chances for success of the Great Leader's mission. The fleet of starships passed it by, and its monochrome clouds swirled in enigmatic salute.

Chapter 1

Where Were You When the UFOs Landed?

Peter Forsythe crouched low, elbows on knees. Ten feet off third base, he was edging in toward the infield grass. His glove was loose and open, but his spikes dug into the dirt, and the muscles of his legs were coiled tightly in anticipation. His eyes bore in on the bat at home plate, just ninety feet away—not on the batter, but on the *bat*, held high and twitching as if it held a life of its own.

Automatically Pete's eyes rechecked the alignment of the batter's feet. The ball would definitely be headed this way. Eight years as the premier third baseman in the American League made him confident in his ability to judge.

He heard the pitch cut the air, straight and fast. The bat whipped forward, too quickly for the human eye to follow except as a tawny blur. The ball came off it like a shot, the sharp rifle crack sounding a split second later.

Even before the sound reached his ears, Pete's reflexes had taken over, his blue eyes tracking the ball as it angled down toward the grass. His compact, lean-muscled body twisted, his left, gloved hand aiming itself where his brain—without any conscious thought—*knew* the ball would ricochet upward after its impact with the grass.

It wasn't enough! He needed another foot of reach, and Pete's body automatically left the ground, diving smoothly, his legs following his trajectory like the tail of

a comet. The ball drilled itself into the deep leather pocket of his glove. He landed on his chest, already scrambling to his knees, his bare right hand clutching the ball and effortlessly snapping a hard throw across the field. With a lazy arc belying the speed and power behind it, the ball thudded into the first baseman's mitt.

Panting, Pete listened automatically for the umpire's bellow of "Out!" But there was no bellow, no cheers from the crowd, no disgruntled opposing player glaring at him as he trudged back to the dugout, eliminated from the inning by yet another Pete Forsythe golden play. Yankee Stadium was empty on this crisp mid-October afternoon—except for Pete, his teammate Joey Vitale at bat, the Yankees' owner, Alexander Garr, playing the first-base side of the infield, and team manager Bobby Neal loading and adjusting the pitching machine as he kept a careful eye on Joey's batting stance. All wore dark-blue team warm-up suits.

"Not bad for an old man," said Garr, his rasping voice carrying all too well across the field. "A few more plays like that during the season and we might've been in the Series now."

The taunt stung. Pete recalled all the grounders that had bounced just beyond his reach, the hanging curve balls he'd inexplicably missed hitting for home runs, all the plays he might have made a season or two ago—and all the nights he'd spent wondering if age was really catching up with him. The season's fourth-place finish hadn't been all his fault, but he was ready to accept his share of the blame, and probably more.

"C'mon, Alex," Joey Vitale called from the batter's box. "Ragging Pete ain't gonna help. And he's *not* old—my dad says thirty-three is barely out of diapers!" The tall, whippet-lean young athlete had celebrated his twenty-fifth birthday only last week.

Garr shook his head, a sour smile making his teeth flash in the brilliant sunshine. He started across the diamond toward Pete, circling around the pitching machine on the mound. "Joey, tell that to the insurance people who cover this Methuselah—he's had so many injuries, they've optioned his legs for the Mayo Clinic."

Forsythe stayed on his knees, enjoying the feeling of the cool grass. Then he looked up at Garr. The owner's perfect posture and cropped gray hair still gave

him the air of the

Marine he'd been in Korea. He looked younger than his fifty-five years.

"More sweet talk?" said Pete.

"Maybe you *are* tradable after all," Garr said with a sardonic grin. "Can I convince another club you've got a few more years of those impossible plays in you, Pete?"

Pete gave him a level stare, then laughed. "Have you forgotten my no-trade contract? Besides, I may have the knees of a seventy-year-old arthritic cripple, but there's still nobody who makes that play more than I do. Right, Joey?"

Joey watched an imagined drive drop into the stands, turned, looked blank for a second, then nodded. "Sure, Pete—all the way." His slow, warmhearted grin brightened his rawboned, homely features, making him almost handsome. Pete grinned back—it was tough for people to stay stone-faced when Joey Vitale smiled at them.

Garr smiled too, but with all the charm of a cattle owner surveying his prizes as they boarded the stock car. "Swift, real swift, isn't he, Forsythe? It's a good thing he's as strong as a bull, 'cause he's got about as much gray matter." He shook his head, watching Bobby Neal set the young batter up for another pitch. The ball streaked toward Vitale and the kid sent it screaming over their heads, a line drive headed for the stands like a tiny rocket plane.

"He ain't so dumb," said Bobby Neal affably, patting his ample belly. "He hits pretty good, and you pay him a million dollars a year for it. Pretty *smart* if you ask me."

Pete laughed out loud. Neal's down-home common sense always deflated Garr's sarcasm, and the veteran manager was such a sweet-natured man that Garr never hit back. "*Damned* smart," Pete kidded, following Neal's lead. "A million dollars a year, and the kid didn't even go to Harvard Business School like you did, Alex."

Garr's face softened as he watched Joey hit another pitch deep into left field. "He is a classic, isn't he?" Garr said, too low for Joey to hear—not that Joey listened

much to what people said about him. "He might be the most graceful outfielder since Joe DiMaggio, Pete. Much as it pains me, I have you to thank for some of this. You've really settled Joey down. I appreciate the big-brother routine. Of course, now that he's matured, I don't need you anymore," Garr quipped.

"Every pup needs a sheepdog," Neal reminded him.

"Only a sheepdog who stays on the wagon," said Garr—the sarcasm was back, full strength and aimed at Pete.

Forsythe felt his jaw tighten as he tried not to show how much it annoyed him when the owner brought up the drinking incident. Once he'd admitted he had a problem three years back, Pete had fought to solve it. He'd *had* it under control too—until that night in Florida. It had been a bad day, one of the worst he'd ever lived through—one he almost *didn't* live through. He'd let his guard down, had one drink, thinking he could stop after that. But he didn't stop even after he left the bar. Not until he'd downed an entire bottle of vodka.

The memory blurred painfully ... *the car ... the rain . . . headlights blinding him . . . swerving . . . then real pain, physical pain, and the blacking out.*

Driving while intoxicated. The papers loved reporting on athletes messing up their lives, Pete thought bitterly. He'd never forget the accident, and he righteously felt he'd done his public penance, but it had taken Bobby Neal's intervention to smooth things over with Garr. The owner wouldn't even speak to his star third baseman until Neal insisted on a meeting. In a room far chillier than the coldest air conditioner could make it, Garr had exacted a promise—no more drinking or, no-trade clause or not, he'd get rid of Pete in a hurry.

Pete kept that promise. *Haven't had a drink since then . . . nineteen months dry as a bone. Won't he ever forget?*

Garr cocked his head at him, his eyes knowing. "What's the matter, Pete? Scared I really might trade you? Or make it so rough you'll quit? Afraid that if you didn't have training to keep you straight you'd go to pot—or alcohol?" He chuckled at his own pun. "I thought you had your post-baseball future all sewed up, Doc."

Forsythe shrugged. "If I wasn't sure there was life after baseball, I wouldn't be spending my winters in med school, now would I? Besides, with the cost of medical care, the only way I'll be able to afford to keep my legs in working order is to have a bunch of colleagues giving me professional courtesy."

"I knew there hadta be a good reason for you to be crazy enough to go back to medical school," said Neal with a chuckle. "Hey, I'm gonna be sixty-five soon and I've been seein' docs more than my wife lately. Are you gonna be a doctor before I'm dead?"

Pete laughed. "I'll give it my best shot, Bobby. And you stick around for a while, okay?"

"I'll give it *my* best shot."

"Hey!" Joey's voice rang out. "You guys want beers?"

"Sure, kid," said Garr.

Joey went to the cooler in the dugout and came back with three bottles of Bud—and a Diet 7Up for Pete. The third baseman looked at the beers for a moment, then resolutely twisted the cap off his soda. He glanced up at Joey as the younger player drank—at six-three, Vitale was a good four inches taller than the stocky Forsythe. With their difference in height, Joey's dark hair and Pete's thinning blond curls, they made for an arresting contrast in looks.

Joey cocked his head at a questioning angle. The pose reminded Forsythe of a collie he'd had as a kid. "What is it, Joey?"

"I dunno," Joey said, his dark eyes narrowing as he scanned the scudding clouds over Yankee Stadium's upper deck. "Can't you hear it?"

"Hear what?" asked Garr.

Pete frowned, not sure that his ears picked up any actual noise—but his feet sure as hell sensed a vibration. Reflexively, he dug his spikes into the grass as the ground began to shudder the way it does when a subway rumbles underneath the street gratings. But there *was* no subway under the stadium.

Garr's face paled beneath his tan. "Earthquake?"

The throbbing filled the air now, a deep humming that hurt the ears. They looked around, but there was nothing to account for the phenomenon—nothing visible.

Joey Vitale's keen young eyes spotted it first, moving in from the north, over the Hudson River. "Look!" he pointed.

Pete Forsythe's gaze followed Joey's finger, and his stomach tightened in disbelief, the way it had when Jean told him she wanted the divorce. He experienced a sudden, irrevocable certainty that his life—that every life on earth—had suddenly changed. Nothing would ever be the same again.

It moved majestically through the air, glimmering silver-blue, a massive round shape thickened in the middle, tapering around its edges. It was so huge as it moved over Yankee Stadium that the sun was totally eclipsed, the brightness of the October day quenched as though it had been snuffed like a candle.

Miles across, Pete thought, his numbed mind struggling to take in the scale of the mammoth ship. *The sonofabitch is miles across!*

It descended through the clouds, the sun playing off its upper surfaces while its belly remained dark. The edge of its monstrous shadow slid across the stadium, rippling down the bleachers, gliding across the outfield. Then the men were looking at the ship as it moved away, settling over Manhattan.

Garr found his voice first. "Christ Almighty! What *is* that?"

Mayor Daniel O'Connor was in his glory—surrounded by smiling children, clicking cameras, and the soft whirr of videotape minicams. The whole scene on the steps of the new building at the Bronx Zoo was being captured for the local evening news. As City Council President Alison Stein watched him, she was convinced all over again that O'Connor's broad face could hold a wider smile for a longer time than any other human being she'd ever known.

"Y'know," the Mayor began, "when I was a little Irish-Jewish kid growing up in Hell's Kitchen—that's on the West Side, for those of you too young to—"

A chorus of groans had erupted from the regular reporters, and O'Connor broke

off, looking around at the grinning faces surrounding him. This was a ritual of every "fun" public appearance and the razzing always accompanied his favorite off-the-cuff speech. "Oh, no, Mayor!" called one reporter, "*not* the little Irish-Jewish-kid from Hell's Kitchen routine again . . . Change the speech, *change the speech*—"

Other members of the press picked up the refrain, and it became a chant of mock protest. The Mayor, a stout fireplug of a man, roared with laughter until he was breathless. "Okay! *Okay!*" He waved for attention. "I promise, no more Irish-Jewish-little-kid stories! Now quiet down!"

The noise subsided and the mayor tried to look serious, returning to his speechifying cadence. "Y'know, everywhere I go, whatever city, when the mayors complain about having to put up with reporters, I always tell them to thank their lucky stars that they don't have to put up with the New York press corps, the wildest, rowdiest bunch I've ever seen—" The reporters began a chorus of catcalls and mock hisses, and the Mayor finished hastily, "But the *best* too, and don't anyone forget it!"

Alison Stein marveled at the way O'Connor handled these spontaneous appearances, the impromptu press conferences, the streetwise give and take that exemplified her city and its sometimes rough edges. Personally, she detested unscripted appearances—she was a careful, methodical person who felt hideously naked without something written down to prompt her. Twenty years as a lawyer and politician had given her a veneer of calm deliberation, but to this day her hands still sweated and her knees knocked when she faced the microphones. She always got a kick out of watching (and envying) O'Connor's masterful handling of the press.

He was waving his hands for order again, and the crowd quieted to hear him. "Okay, back to why we're here at the Bronx Zoo, the best zoo in the world. When I was a kid, I used to love hopping on the subway and coming up here—and, y'know, I still do. But today I'm even happier and prouder than I was as a kid, because lately, with the support of many local businesses and corporations plus the generosity of private citizens all over the city, the zoo has been raising money for improvements. The zoo we see today is a growing, changing environment, and for hundreds of miles in any direction it's the premier place to see animals in habitats that come as close to nature as possible—right here in the

biggest city in America!"

There was a ripple of applause. O'Connor gestured to the building behind him. "Now, today, we're officially dedicating this new reptile house. This alligator pool behind me, I'm told, duplicates a Southern river ecosystem—a bit of the Everglades right here in the Big Apple. Isn't it great?"

The photographers snapped away and the kids in the crowd squealed in joyous fright as doors opened in the stony walls and several alligators slithered through them into the pool, tails undulating in powerful swishes, their tiny eyes nearly hidden amid their dark greenish-brown scales. They didn't look particularly hungry, but with jaws nearly a foot and a half long, nobody wanted to stick his or her hand in to see if they'd be interested.

"Mr. Mayor," called a reporter, "why don't you climb in there and pose with those alligators? It'd make a great shot!"

The crowd laughed and O'Connor smiled benignly. "You're quite a comedian, Ralston."

"Why not?" the young woman grinned cheekily. "Are you chicken, Mr. Mayor?"

O'Connor pursed his lips. "The 'gators might enjoy me more if I was, but no, the Mayor is not chicken. The Mayor is also not a fool. Besides, I'd be perfectly safe. I have it on good authority that these are Democratic alligators."

A burst of laughter rolled over the uninterested heads of the reptiles. O'Connor waved at them. "Alison Stein made sure they had the right party affiliation before she'd agree to let me come here and introduce 'em to the city. Because, you see, if anything *did* happen to me, she'd end up as mayor, and as we all know, she's a lady who prefers to run things from behind the scenes. Alison ..." O'Connor looked around. "C'mon up here, Alison."

Trying not to color, she pulled her jacket straight and edged toward the Mayor and the hated microphones, wishing O'Connor had let her just hide in the crowd. She glared at him covertly as she mounted the steps toward him. A woman in her mid-forties, she looked her age. She was a shade on the plump side, with yard-long dark hair (which she kept coiled in a neatly braided bun during the day),

fair skin, and determined dark eyes. Divorced for more than a decade, she'd somehow managed to juggle raising three children with a full-time job, law school at night, and working her way up through the male-dominated Democratic hierarchy. This was her second term as City Council president.

O'Connor slung an arm around her shoulders as Alison joined him at the top of the steps. "Alison Stein here," he said, "is largely responsible for this new reptile facility, though she'd be the last one to take credit for her own hard work. But she spent a lot of time lining up some of the larger donations from local businesses. I think all New Yorkers should thank her—/ want to take this opportunity to publicly express my appreciation." He beckoned to the crowd. "How about it?"

The applause was enthusiastic. Alison blushed to the roots of her hair, and, irritated, realized the flush would probably show on camera. "And what's more," O'Connor said as the lapping began to die away, "I think if you reporters want to hear *the* most heartfelt praise for Alison's work you're likely to hear, you ought to interview the alligators!"

But the line didn't get the laugh O'Connor had expected—the attention of the crowd was suddenly elsewhere. Alison turned on the steps, her gaze searching. There was a gut-quivering hum coming from—from where? It seemed to emanate from everywhere at once. The reporters murmured, wondering. The bass throbbing intensified. Photographers and cameramen and -women turned, searching, trying to be the first to capture the source of the vibrating sound—trying to latch on to a really *big* story for the evening news.

It was big, all right. Somehow they all saw it at once. The huge vessel drifted overhead as lightly as one of the clouds, impossibly huge, impossibly real. The Mayor looked at it for a long moment, his freckles standing out against his pallor, then turned to Alison. "Shit—talk about being upstaged, Ali," he said soberly, his pale blue eyes shining with fear and excitement. "Think I'll get a laugh if I tell 'em it's all a Republican campaign stunt?"

White House Press Secretary Fred Foster cradled the phone on his shoulder as he hastily scribbled notes on a pad. "No, we have no comment as of yet. The report is still unconfirmed. No, I won't confirm the name of the city. The reports remain unconfirmed. No, no, as soon as we have a statement to make, you'll

have it."

He slammed the phone down with a muttered curse just as his cubicle door burst open. Chief of Staff Leonard Katowski stood in the doorway, his knuckles resting on his hips, wrinkling the pinstripes of his ancient navy-blue suit. "Let's go, F. F.—*now*." He ran an urgent hand through his thick black hair, leaving it standing even more on end. His suit was a touch too short for his long thin limbs—Foster had always fancied in idle moments that Katowski would fit right in as the scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Foster nodded, standing, ignoring the phone as it shrilled again. "Another one. Christ, how the hell do they expect me to find out anything if they keep me tied up on the phone?"

Automatically he pulled on his jacket, checked the knot on his tie, and smoothed down his wispy blond hair. Katowski fairly danced in the doorway as Foster came toward him, leaving the phone still jangling insistently.

The portly Foster, at least a head shorter than the Chief of Staff, had to jog to keep up with Katowski's quick tread. "Hold all my calls!" he shouted at his secretary as they passed her door, his and Katowski's feet silent on the thick carpet. "What's new?" Foster asked, guessing the answer.

"We've confirmed the sighting. Fighters are being scrambled. We've got to wake up the President *now*."

"We do?" Foster remembered the time they'd awakened the Chief Executive from his afternoon nap, only to discover the reports of new troop movement in Afghanistan were the result of a translator's error.

"We do," Katowski stated. "Or else, Freddy, you're going to be the one fielding press questions on why the President wasn't bright-eyed and bushy-tailed when the UFO's invaded from space."

Foster stopped so short he nearly fell. "*UFO's? Plural?*"

Katowski grabbed his arm and pulled him along. "Plural. National Security Agency says the things are being sighted all over the world. We've had formal confirmations from Great Britain, France, and Japan."

"Who gave the order to scramble the jets?"

"Base commanders. SOP. Reconnaissance and radio contact, if possible, to establish their intentions. Now move it, Freddy—quit asking so many questions! We've gotta get our asses in gear and tell Morrow!"

Foster tried to stop again, but Katowski wouldn't even let him break stride. "I *have* to ask questions," he sputtered. "I'm the goddamned Press Secretary!"

They swung into Katowski's office, one door away from the Oval Office. The Chief of Staff began shoveling papers from his blotter into a file folder, his bony hands moving with the precision of a threshing machine—churning, sorting, and sifting. "I thought you were in a hurry," Foster protested halfheartedly.

"Briefing papers. I'm not getting caught with my pants down, and I won't let Morrow or you face the press without doing my job."

Foster began to laugh. "*Briefing papers?* For something that Killed three minutes ago? Are you nuts? What are you giving him, a synopsis of *Earth Versus the Flying Saucers?*"

Katowski gave Foster a bland look. "I have briefing papers lor any contingency you could possibly dream up, Freddy."

"I could never have thought of *this*."

"*That's* why I'm Chief of Staff, and *you're* the Press Secretary." Katowski looked grim.

There was a knock from the open door. They looked up to see a compactly built man looking in. "Ready to go?" asked Gerald Livingston, the perfectly tailored and barbered National Security Adviser.

"One more report," said Katowski, heading for the file cabinets across the room. "How are things downstairs?"

"We're on top of it," said Livingston, sounding miffed that Katowski could think otherwise.

Foster pursed his lips. He'd never liked or trusted Livingston, a man who had no rough edges, no apparent weak spots. He was entirely too calculated for Foster's tastes; "Isn't State gonna be pissed that NSA was in on this from the instant we woke the President up?" asked the Press Secretary.

Livingston shrugged, smiling faintly. "Who cares? Let State be pissed. That's the price Nick Draper pays for having that lancy, plush office out in Foggy Bottom, while I slave in the White House basement."

Katowski yanked one more folder out of a file cabinet, sending the metal drawer slamming back into place. "Got it. Let's go."

"Who's actually going to do the waking?" asked Livingston.

"Do we look like idiots?" growled Foster. "Morrow's *wife* is going to do it."

They took the elevator upstairs to the First Family's living quarters. Foster thought about his secretary and deputy handling a Christmas tree's worth of press office phone lines lit up by cabinet officials, Pentagon brass, citizens, and foreign allies, all wanting to be able to rest easy, to know that President William Brent Morrow had the situation well in hand. In truth, Morrow was probably one of the few Americans remaining who was still resting easy—but that, obviously, was about to change.

The elevator door opened, and Barbara Morrow, a slim, patrician woman in her late fifties, greeted them with a thin smile. "Gentlemen, does anyone have any idea what's actually going on?"

"Not really," said Katowski. "Not yet. No sightings in this area—but they're confirmed in New York, Dallas, St. Louis, and several cities in Europe."

"However bad this may get," said Foster, resisting the urge to drum his fingers on the door frame, "it'll be worse if it gets out that we didn't wake him right away."

Barbara Morrow nodded and led them into the bedroom, clicking the lamp on to its lowest setting. The aides stood back while she gently touched her husband's shoulder. He was stretched out on the handmade quilt, dressed in jeans and a plaid shirt, a big, handsome man with thick gray hair—what a President *should*

look like, Foster had always thought. But he did not like being awakened from the naps his physician had prescribed when the Chief Executive had suffered minor chest pains last year.

Morrow rolled over with a grunt, saw his wife, then his aides. "What's wrong?" he mumbled.

"Are you awake, sir?" asked Foster gingerly, remembering the President's heart. Perhaps they should have brought Dr. Washington along.

"I wake up instantly," Morrow snapped. "It's a skill I learned during World War Two in airfield barracks. Now, you boys know what I said the last time you woke me for a bad reason—so I'm safe in assuming this is a good one, am I not?"

Katowski, Foster, and Livingston swallowed in unison, looked at each other to see who wanted to go first, then back at the President. Morrow gave his wife an exasperated glance. "You interrupted my nap for the Three Stooges?"

Suddenly the White House shuddered down to its two-century-old bones. Morrow was on his feet immediately. "Are we under attack?"

"Not exactly," said Katowski, edging nervously toward the window.

"Not *exactly*!" the President echoed. "We don't have earthquakes here, and it feels like the plaster's going to come down if those vibrations get any worse!"

"We—we don't know if they're hostile," said Katowski, avoiding the President's question.

"*Who* is 'they'?" the President demanded.

Foster pulled open the heavy drapes, feeling his heart pause, then pound with hammer blows that made him wish they'd brought Dr. Washington along for *him*. Morrow strode to the window, stopped, and stared out. His wife and aides arrayed themselves behind him.

"*That* is 'they,' sir," said Foster.

"We don't know who they are," said Livingston, "but there are apparently a lot of

them."

It took the Commander-in-Chief of the most powerful nation on earth many heartbeats to find his voice. "Holy shit. You sure I'm not dreaming?"

"No windows. I never know what time of day it is," grumbled Denise Daltrey, rubbing her eyes as she looked at the digital clock on her office desk. It told her it was 4:06 P.M. in the CBS News Building, a former dairy barn in this less-than-chic neighborhood on Manhattan's West Side. It also told her that she'd definitely never make her tennis lesson that afternoon.

As she reached for the telephone to call the pro and apologize, a didactic little voice began a sermonizing monologue: *You're skipping your tennis lesson today, and yesterday you were too tired to get it up to jog. And because you skipped your exercise, you're now so bleary-eyed that you probably don't recall a damn thing you just skipped your tennis lesson to read. Those nice young kids in research did all that digging for you, and when you get on the air tomorrow and the most intelligent thing you can utter is a burp, they'll think it was their fault you blew it, and one of them will try to pitch him or herself out the nearest upper-story window . . . which may be why they make researchers work in an office that has no windows. You're going to have to take better care of yourself, Denise old gal, if you want to keep your job. Viewers will take a dim view of a morning news anchorwoman who falls asleep in the middle of her own show . . .*

"Idiot!" a voice chided aloud, and Denise barely avoided jumping as she recognized it as her own. Firmly she gave herself a silent reminder to get a grip on things—after all, she *loved* her job. After a rocky start, she'd gone on to make the co-anchor spot her own. But now, a year into the mad pace, the hours were starting to take their toll—rising at 1:30 A.M. and getting to work by 3:30; being charming, witty, and incisive for two hours while millions of people watched her over their eggs and juice and the sounds of showers, razors, and hair dryers; then meetings on the following day's lineup, followed by lunch and more meetings; then tennis or a workout (when she could squeeze it in and wasn't too exhausted) and back to the office for more work. Finally, she was home by 5:00 for a nap, up at 7:00 to watch the network's flagship, The Evening News, then to sleep, perchance not to dream—*please!*—of all the things she should have done that day but hadn't.

Denise made her apologetic call, then peered into the mirror hanging at eye level over her IBM Selectric. Bags were starting to take up permanent residence beneath her blue eyes and some mornings, even her heavy sweep of sable hair looked tired.

Frowning, Denise quickly wielded her under-eye coverup stick, then freshened her mascara and shadow. Yeah, okay, so the job was grueling. Nobody had ever said it would be easy—and the fact remained that she had never wanted to do anything else and that she was in a very prestigious position for her age. She was getting a ton of experience and exposure—not bad for a kid who'd worked her way up from doing the weather on a Providence radio station. At thirty-three, Denise was what she'd always wanted to be, and she'd achieved that goal without ever compromising her integrity. She'd made it totally on her abilities, her rapport with people, and to be brutally honest, her looks. Homely people had a real disadvantage when bucking for an anchor slot.

Now, her hand resting on the telephone, she faced a turning point—she could read more background on this story she'd be doing tomorrow, or she could call a friend to wangle a late afternoon match. Kathy was a good player, and while she wouldn't give Denise the workout her pro would, at least it would be *something*. She kicked back in her chair, closed her eyes, and mumbled her decision in a small, guilt-ridden voice: "Tennis." Her hips felt bulgy, and she was convinced that only immediate exercise would prevent her looking like a blimp onscreen tomorrow.

She began to dial. "Hi, Kath—Denise. I missed my pro today and came down with a galloping case of the guilts. Want to play for an hour? I can grab a cab and be there in ten minutes." She listened for a moment. "Aw, c'mon, Kath— pretty please? You can get over to Bloomie's tomorrow. I'll even go with you. I've just *gotta* work the kinks out!"

The intercom speaker on her phone burbled insistently. "Hang on a second, Kath. My secretary's buzzing me." With a sigh she switched on the intercom. "I'm not here, Paula. I'm dead, and I won't revive without some exercise," she said, managing a convincingly pathetic whimper. She listened for a moment, then laughed tiredly. "Right. There's a giant UFO over New York City, so I can't leave to play tennis ..."

She was still chuckling humorlessly when the door to her office slammed back and a tieless Dan Rather stood there in his shirt-sleeves, his dark eyes excited, though his face bore its usual calm. Denise forgot her fatigue, realizing that what Paula had reported *wasn't* her customary zany notion of humor, but the truth. Rather's terse words only confirmed what she knew. "Staff meeting, Bennie's conference room, right now, Denise. UFO over New York and who knows where else. The President has been alerted."

Then he was gone.

Numbly Denise punched back in on Kathy's line. "Kath? Dan Rather just told me there's a UFO over New York. I don't think I can play tennis after all. Call you later. Bye."

Ignoring the sputtering squawks from the receiver, she hung up. The adrenaline was starting to flow the way it always did when a really *big* story loomed, and the rush banished her fatigue. Denise Daltrey grabbed her notebook and tape recorder as she stood. "Hot damn!" she said aloud. "A friggin' *UFO!*"

Lauren Stewart carefully washed a dish, placing it securely into the rack. She ran a finger over the pretty Bavarian floral pattern, remembering how much her mother had loved these dishes, how proud she'd been when her husband's struggling medical practice had blossomed and they'd finally been able to afford this service for eight. That had been shortly after they'd bought this brownstone in Harlem, and Lauren's mother had been so happy keeping everything shining and perfect. Noelani Stewart had never wanted to work outside her home—she'd been perfectly content serving as her husband's receptionist and secretary, and keeping this house the way she'd trained her daughter and her husband to maintain it.

Gets dishes so clean you can see yourself in them, thought Lauren, rinsing the last plate and holding it up to see if she *could* see her face in it. *Not quite*, she thought, seeing only a blurred light-brown oval. Her mind quickly sketched in what the wet surface didn't reveal: her mother's fine-boned Polynesian features, dark-brown almond-shaped eyes, straight black hair, and coloring that fell somewhere between her mother's rich caramel and her father's milk chocolate. She grinned, seeing a white-sugar blur of teeth. *Are sweets all you can think of?* she wondered, amused at herself. *You've been on this diet twenty-four hours and*

already you're going into carbohydrate withdrawal.

She laughed aloud, then heard her father's voice behind her. "What're you laughing at, honey?"

"Myself, Dad. I'm trying to lose five pounds before I start on that overseas goodwill tour with Olav, so I'll have a couple of pounds to play with. You know those diplomatic dinners. And I just realized I'd probably *kill* for a bag of M&M's—peanut or plain, I wouldn't be fussy."

Dr. Stewart chuckled. "Lauren, most women would *kill* to have your figure. I can never understand why the fashions say you have to be ten pounds underweight."

Lauren carefully put the last dish into the drainer and let the water out of the sink, turning to see her father sit down at the table behind her. "I'm hurt, Dad." She made a face at him. "The medical statistics all back me up—it's better to be underweight than overweight!"

Dr. George Stewart looked down at his own stomach through his glasses, then patted its comfortable bulge consolingly. "You're right—and you know I think you're gorgeous, baby. Almost as pretty as your mama, and she was the prettiest woman I ever saw." He grinned a lopsided, slightly sentimental grin.

"Do you remember how Mama worked to take care of this place?" Lauren asked, sitting down opposite him. "I remember once asking her if we couldn't just skip the cleaning for one week, and she just looked at me and said that *her* house got cleaned every week, and that was that. Like the Ten Commandments or something."

Her father nodded, his long dark fingers fiddling with the slack of papers from his anatomy class at Cornell Medical Center, which he'd been grading earlier. "I remember. She wanted you to have this house someday, you know. She'd be disappointed to know you won't be living here after I'm gone."

Lauren stiffened slightly, afraid they might be edging toward one of their painful "discussions." Hastily, she tried to turn the conversation away from her own future. "Is that why you stayed on here after Mama died?"

"No, no, honey. I stayed here because this neighborhood needs a doctor. Why,

who else would answer the phone in the middle of the night to help those folks? All the younger fellows have those answering services."

"Oh, Daddy ..." Lauren said, half-admiring and half-despairing, as she took his hand in hers. "Those folks would find another doctor somewhere, you know they would! Half the time they wake you up for something on the order of a hangnail, and then you have trouble getting back to sleep. You're not the only physician in Harlem, you know. When are you going to cut back? Between your practice here and the classes at med school—" She shook her head. "When are you going to take some time for *you*?"

"I'm fine, baby!" He grinned at her. "Keeping busy keeps me young. If I didn't have those patients and these students to worry about, I'd sit at home worrying about *you*—and then where would we be?"

"I know that," she admitted quietly, patting his hand. "I'm sorry, Dad. Why do we always have this same argument? I can keep a half-dozen Third World delegates from fighting, but I can't keep from fussing with my own father."

He smiled gently. "Those delegates aren't kin, Lauren. Only folks who love each other can fuss the way we do, baby."

Lauren grinned. "I'm almost thirty-five and still your baby, huh, Dad?"

"Always, sweetheart."

They smiled at each other, enjoying the closeness their weekly visit always brought—and heard the dishes in the drain begin to rattle. Jumping up, Lauren raced over to stand by them protectively, her dark eyes wide. The old house vibrated, then began to shake slightly. The stack of papers slid off the table and across the floor, leaving a white swath on the spotless linoleum.

"What in the hell—" George Stewart hurried over to the window. Down in the street people were hurrying out of their homes and apartments, looking up and gesturing. As Lauren joined him at the window, George Stewart looked up too.

Even as Lauren saw the unbelievable apparition of a massive flying saucer hovering over the city, the phone began to ring. Dr. Stewart snatched it up. "Doc Stewart here." He looked up at his daughter. "Yes, she's here."

He handed the phone to Lauren. "Hello?" she said. "Yes, I can see it. Anything official yet?" She listened for a second, then made a face. "Par for the course. I'll be there as soon as I can. I hope I can get a cab."

She hung up. "Gotta go, Daddy. Whatever that thing is, there are more like it hovering over other cities all over the world. The whole UN is going bananas—everyone accusing everyone of being responsible, even though they know the odds against that thing being from this planet." She broke off, realizing that it was odd to think of Earth as only one of a myriad of other planets . . .

Her father kissed her cheek. "Sounds like a job for Super-Diplomat."

"Yes, but I guess they're stuck with me," she said dryly. "I'll call you as soon as I know anything."

"I suspect I might be busy too. UFO's coming to pay a visit are bound to give some folks upset stomachs—not to mention heart attacks and strokes."

"Good luck, Daddy." She started for the door, then reached back to hold his hand tightly. "Remember how much I love you."

"I love you too, honey." Their fingers slipped apart, and he kissed her again, holding her for a long moment.

Chapter 2

Alarums and Excursions

President Morrow was fortunate that he'd taken his nap, for it was the last sleep he got for nearly twenty-four hours. The Oval Office quickly became a command post while Morrow spoke with seemingly endless succession of military officials, congressional leaders, and executive branch assistants. The White House switchboard nearly shorted out with the volume of calls, and the kitchen staff worked around the clock preparing meals, sandwiches, and what seemed like oceans of coffee.

Intelligence agents and station chiefs had begun reporting in from around the globe within minutes of the first sightings. Central Intelligence, National

Security, and Defense intelligence personnel vied with each other to see who could bring in the greatest volume of useful information in the shortest order.

Unfortunately, all of the services soon found themselves in possession of only a few—and identical—verifiable facts: (1) the ships were there, hovering a mile or more above most of the major cities of the Earth, (2) each measured about five *miles* in diameter, and (3) there were at least fifty of them hanging over the world's major cities—Washington, New York, Paris, Athens, Tokyo, Moscow, London, Rome, Leningrad, Cairo, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Houston, Pretoria, Buenos Aires, Bonn, Peking, New Delhi, Jerusalem . . .

The huge saucers made no moves or sounds once they'd settled in. Every nation with an air force quickly sent fighter patrols up. Actually, the Israelis had been first, taking matters into their own hands without waiting for the superpowers to push their military bureaucracies into motion. Their F-16's, emblazoned with the Star of David, screamed up from desert bases, flitted around the monstrous ship over Jerusalem, then peeled off to check out its twin hovering over (and dwarfing) the pyramids in Egypt.

"Wing commander to base," radioed the patrol leader. The signal was patched into Prime Minister Avram Herzog's office. The Prime Minister was an urbane man who displayed little emotion in the face of this, or any other crisis. He sat by as Defense Minister Yitzhak Dinitz answered the call.

Dinitz, dressed in civilian khaki, was a barrel-chested man whose no-nonsense bearing was softened by a deceptively quiet voice. "Report, Major. Dinitz speaking. Over."

There was a spatter of static, and then: "We can't get any closer than about a kilometer, sir. The intruders are jamming our electronics and navigation computers. They don't respond to any of our hailing frequencies. Over."

"Have they lost anyone?" the Prime Minister whispered to Dinitz. The Defense Minister relayed the question.

"Us? Of course not," said the pilot, sounding indignant. "Besides, they haven't made any hostile moves. Or any moves at all, for that matter. They're just hovering. Request further orders, sir."

Dinitz glanced at Herzog.

The Prime Minister gazed calmly back. "You're the expert, Yitzhak. Do you have a recommendation?"

"They haven't made any hostile moves, true, but they haven't made any friendly ones either. Not even saying hello. I say we give them one more chance to talk to us, then we fire."

The Prime Minister raised a dark eyebrow, stroking thoughtfully at his short beard. "If we do that, we *could* go down in history as the nation that started the first interplanetary war. But we'd like them to talk to us. How about if we aim a bit wide, just to see what they do?"

Dinitz nodded, and tersely gave the order.

In seconds they'd added one more fact about the UFOs to world knowledge: weapons fired at the huge ships simply went astray, detonating harmlessly, high in the upper atmosphere.

And so the world waited. At four in the morning, President Morrow ordered his staff out of the Oval Office. "Come back when you have something new to report," he said. "But not until then. We can sit here and speculate until the stars—or those damned ships—fall out of the sky, and it won't do any of us a bit of good. Beat it, all of you. Get some rest."

Press Secretary Foster was almost to the door when Morrow's words stopped him. "Not you, Freddy. Stick around, if you don't mind."

As Foster nodded and came back into the room, Morrow leaned back in his chair, his heels propped on the desk, waving a weary hand at the triple-screen TV showing the continuous coverage on all three networks. "Turn 'em off, Freddy."

The Press Secretary did so, then sank into a burgundy leather chair facing his boss. Still leaning back, Morrow stretched until his joints cracked. "Ah, peace and quiet at long last."

"Aren't you worried that you'll miss something, sir?" asked Foster.

"If anything interesting happens, seventeen people will be trying to squeeze through that door at the same instant, all dying to be the first to tell me. Maybe the old custom of killing the messenger wasn't such a bad idea—cuts down on doorway traffic jams." Morrow chuckled at the look on Foster's face. "Laugh, Freddy. That was a joke."

"Too close to home, sir. *I'm* usually a messenger."

"Hmm. I see your point." Morrow slumped back in his chair. "Any changes in the national reaction to those silent critters?" He hooked a thumb toward the ceiling.

"The highways out of the cities are beginning to clear out. Seems like the folks who decided to stay put are still staying put. The ones who ran for it have gotten out of the cities by now."

"Where'd they all head? The country? Mountains?"

"Yeah. I wish I'd bought stock in a camping-goods store or a four-wheel-drive lot. General Loman reported that they were having to put the motor pools under tight security—jeeps were disappearing like crazy."

Morrow made a *tch-tch* noise. "This mess is going to wreak havoc with the GNP indicators for the year."

"I agree, sir."

The two men sat quietly for a long moment. The President swiveled his chair around to peer out the window behind his desk, the one the White house photographer used when he wanted to take a dramatic photo of the Chief Executive working late at night during a worldwide crisis. Sure enough, there was the photographer out on the lawn, shivering as the predawn autumn wind whipped around him.

As the man saw Morrow looking at him, he raised his hand in a quick salute and left.

"I can see the photo caption," Foster observed. " 'Wild Bill' Morrow burns midnight oil trying to solve UFO crisis."

Morrow chuckled. "Maybe I oughta put my flannel shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots back on, so folks'll recognize me."

Foster smiled wearily. "When did you ever get that nickname, sir? Hardly anyone ever uses it anymore—maybe they've tamed the West out of you."

Morrow's grin flashed for a second. "Shucks, son, you can take the boy out of Texas, but you can't *ever* take the Texas out of the boy. I got that nickname back in World War Two. When I first ran for state senate back in 1958, the campaign people loved it. Gave me 'color,' they said. But then when I started getting nudges to declare my candidacy for President, they wanted me to downplay my cowboy image—even though that image was really me. I told 'em, hell, no! Americans love cowboys, I said, and this is the way I've always been."

"Still are, sir. You've been the same guy all along."

"I wear more suits than I used to," Morrow admitted. "This job changes you no matter how much you think you can stay the same. You sit up nights worrying about things that other people never even know about."

Foster grimaced. "Well, at least you're not alone sitting up tonight, sir. Half the population of the country is probably suffering from insomnia."

"And while we sweat, those little green creeps up there are probably laughing through their teeth—assuming they're green and have teeth."

Foster was quiet for a while, then asked. "How'd you get the nickname during the war, sir, if you don't mind my asking?"

"You don't know?"

"Well ... I heard some rumors. Nothing confirmed."

Morrow guffawed. "You heard right, Freddy. I used to fly slaloms between telephone poles. Must have been good practice because I came back in one piece from fifty-three bombing missions. Course I was just a youngster in those days—I'd never have the nerve to do anything so foolish now."

Foster looked at Morrow, seeing a twinkle in the Chief Executive's eye,

remembering the time he'd insisted on taking the controls of Air Force One for a half-hour during the end of a transatlantic flight—the air traffic controller had become incoherent when Morrow had identified himself as the approaching pilot and then requested landing coordinates. The President had convinced all of them he might actually attempt a landing before grinning and relinquishing the controls to his pilot. The Press Secretary grinned wryly now, then sobered, thinking of the UFO hovering over the nation's capital like a blue-silver thundercloud. "Do you think the country will get out of this in one piece, sir?" he asked.

Morrow sighed. "I wish I knew, Freddy. I wish I knew."

Activity at the United Nations also continued into the small hours of the night. Lauren Stewart stood beside Secretary General Olav Lindstrom as they met with ambassadorial delegations and counseled patience. At least, Lauren thought, it was comforting to know that even if their advice was ignored, there was little anyone could do. The invulnerability of the alien craft was a more powerful argument than any the Secretary General or his special assistant could muster.

Lindstrom was noted for his patience. Depending on who was talking, it was either his most admirable virtue or his biggest failing. Lauren had taken his special seminar at Harvard, while he was the delegate from Sweden and she was completing her master's in International Relations. By the second week of the course, she'd developed a firm and growing admiration for the white-haired man with the neatly trimmed moustache. As she'd listened to him talk about World War Two, how Sweden had managed to walk the fine line of neutrality, not antagonizing the Russians yet still managing to help the British and Americans when they could, Lauren watched his deep, mournful eyes—sad eyes that had learned to observe while others blustered. Lindstrom spoke often about the tactic of calm observation, of finding and seizing the tiniest common ground on which to build a foundation of peaceful coexistence.

But during this long night of too many questions and too few, answers, Lauren watched her idol become progressively quieter. The presence of beings from another part of the universe was something that the aging Lindstrom was having trouble accepting. Eventually, Lauren tactfully took over the meetings, moderating with the skill and presence the old man had first spotted in her at Harvard. The young grad student with the exotic looks had easily been the

brightest in all the seminars he'd taught, and he'd been pleased when she accepted his invitation to become part of his staff after he was appointed Secretary General.

The UN gatherings ended before dawn, and at Lauren's insistence, Lindstrom retreated to his office for a nap. Lauren could have sprawled on the couch in her own office, but she knew she'd lie there wide-eyed, stiff and listening. Instead, she bundled up in her coat and went up to the outdoor observation deck. For a long time she stood in the cold, staring up at the wash of spotlights against the belly of the dark alien bulk looming over her city.

Slowly she became aware that the city beneath her feet sounded wrong. Wandering over to the railing, she looked down, expecting—but not finding—the light trails of cars, cabs, trucks, and buses. But only a few tiny gleams threaded their way through the street grid. New York was almost totally silent, as though crouching in fear.

Lauren had always felt the self-confidence of a native New Yorker. She was a product of this odd urban mixture of cosmopolitan slick and rough-and-tumble crude. She felt a fierce pride in knowing her city could take on just about anything nature—or man—could throw at it, and come up swinging.

Until now. Down below, the streetlights began to wink out as the sun tinged the bottoms of the clouds near the bridges between Manhattan and Brooklyn, magically turning their cables into a sparkling filigree. Lauren took a deep breath of the morning air and—she couldn't help it—stuck out her tongue at the alien ship. "Screw you," she whispered. "*Don't* talk—see if we care."

She went back to her office, then gratefully poured herself a cup of coffee and picked up the phone. She dialed her father's number.

"Dad? It's Lauren. I hope I didn't wake you, but I didn't know when I'd get another chance to call."

"No, honey." Her father's voice sounded alert. "I've been up awhile. Slept a little, but not much. My guess is that there are gonna be a *lot* of tired people around the

world today. How's it going at the UN?"

Lauren stifled a yawn. "Calm, for the moment. They all lired themselves out making accusations they knew were wrong and pointless, just from force of habit. It could have been worse."

There was a soft knock on Lauren's door. A young Indian [X)ked his turbaned head in. "Sorry to disturb you, Ms. Stewart, but there is a meeting in ten minutes, and Mr. Lindstrom requests your presence."

"Okay, Sanjay. Dad, I've got to go. Hang in there. I'll talk to you later."

Almost two hours later, it happened.

A pulsing tone beamed out from the huge spaceships— steady, unvarying, *global*. The pulsing signals sounded for several minutes.

President Morrow was still at his desk in the Oval Office, but the television sets were back on and the room was crowded with people. His eyes—and all other eyes in the room—were on the multiple-screen TV console, watching as the network commentators tried to make some sense out of what was happening. From outside they could hear the pulsing tones being echoed from the ship overhead.

"Turn Channel Nine up," Morrow said, and a staff member fiddled with the remote. "I've always liked Denise Daltrey. Basy on the vision, and she doesn't mince words."

Denise's crisp, even tones filled the Chief Executive's office. ". . . and this literally unearthly sound continues to pulse from the alien space vessels, as it has for about five minutes now. Our correspondents around the world report that the—the beacon, for want of a better word—began at almost the same second from every ship. This morning we're lucky enough to have Dr. Isaac Asimov here with us in our New York studio. Dr. Asimov is, of course, a world-famous science authority and

science fiction writer. He's the author of almost three hundred books on everything from black holes to the Bible—"

"I think we would need a combination of the two to figure out what's been happening to our planet since yesterday afternoon," Asimov said, directing his most charming smile at Denise. "And while I have indeed studied black holes *and* the Bible, I've never claimed to understand them fully—especially at the same time."

She finally allowed herself a return smile.

"Ah!" he said. "You *can* smile! You've been so grim since I came in here. I get upset when women react with grim resignation at my arrival. Resignation I can understand, but *grim* resignation—never!"

Denise's mouth twitched as she looked into the camera. "We asked Doctor Asimov to come in to enlighten us, and he's also entertaining us—a double threat. But speaking of threats, Doctor, do you think we *are* in danger from these vessels hovering over our planet?"

Asimov scratched thoughtfully at one bushy muttonchop sideburn. "Well, Denise, speaking from my perspective as a human, if they were going to do terrible things to us, I think they would have done them already. Why wait? It was apparent after the first ten minutes that there wasn't anything we could do to stop them. But in considering the possible motivations of alien beings, you have to remember that they may not *have* motivations that are comprehensible to us."

He grinned at her. "What reasons can you think of to travel to another planet, Denise?"

Denise looked slightly taken aback. "Trade? Commerce with other planets? Friendliness? War?"

"All good reasons," Asimov said. "All reasons that we humans can relate to. But what about aliens who might have come here on a religious pilgrimage—they have it set down in their version of the Bible that they must visit this dinky little world every ten billion years or the universe goes kaput. So here they are!"

Denise nodded. "I see what you mean. Their reasons might be reasons we can't even *imagine*," she said.

"Right," said Asimov approvingly. "In a case like this, predictions are pretty

useless—but fun. Until something else

happens, I'll reserve judgment as to their intentions." He grinned and shrugged. "What else can I do?"

Denise cocked her head, touching her hidden earphone. "What was that? Excuse me, Dr. Asimov, but I'm being told that something is—" She broke off, listening; then her calm tones sharpened with excitement. "Yes! It's a *voice*! The first voice we've ever heard from another world. We're patching this vocal signal in so we can all hear it. It's being picked up on the international emergency frequency."

She and Asimov both turned to watch the large monitor behind them. The view of the alien ship hovering over Manhattan was unchanged.

A voice filled the speakers, a male voice, neutrally accented, shaking ordinary English. But there was a strange timbre to it, like the resonance of a multitrack recording. The voice was counting: "... fifteen, fourteen, thirteen ..."

"I wonder if this represents a living being," Asimov murmured, "or an electronic voice ..."

"Perfect English," Denise said, then, listening to her earphone again, continued, "No, I'm told it's in different languages all over the world."

The control-room technicians were frantically switching feeds so that every three numbers heard by the viewing audience came over in different languages—French, Russian, Hebrew, Spanish, then back to English as the voice reached "one."

There was a brief pause that seemed to last millennia, then: "Citizens of the planet Earth. We bring you greetings . . . and we come in peace. May we respectfully request that the Secretary General of your United Nations come to the top of the United Nations Building in New York at 0100 Greenwich time this evening. Thank you."

The transmission ended and there was silence. Denise Daltrey found her voice. "0100 Greenwich time. That's eight RM. Eastern time. And of course we'll be there covering this story of . . . well, I was going to say the story of the century, Doctor Asimov, but this is really *the* story of all recorded history."

"You're right," said Asimov, for once completely serious. "How many hours do we have to go?"

Denise glanced at her watch. "Just about thirteen and a half hours."

Asimov settled back in his chair, his grin back. "Want to see how many guesses we can rack up in that time as to why they're here? I'll bet I can think of stranger ones than *you* can."

Denise began to chuckle, shaking her head, and held up a pleading hand. "No contest, Dr. Asimov—you're the expert in this field."

Asimov shrugged. "In this situation, there's no such thing as an expert."

Chapter 3

The Visitors

Olav Lindstrom splashed water on his face, then patted it dry, leaning close to the mirror in his office bathroom. His weathered skin and hands attested to the rugged outdoor life he'd loved back in Sweden, but his recent life here in the United States had left him little time for outdoor exercise. His only escape these days was cross-country skiing, which he did in Central Park when there was enough snow—but New York winters had been uncooperative for the past couple of years. Lindstrom frowned, noticing the sag developing under his chin and the way the lines etched around his eyes were now creeping across his forehead and down his cheeks.

It wasn't only his appearance that troubled him—Lindstrom could feel his physical endurance flagging noticeably of late. He doubted that he'd be able to break kindling anymore, much less chop up a cord of wood—one of his proudest accomplishments in his native country had been keeping his own fireplace supplied each winter.

He sighed, listening to Bach's delicate latticework of flute and harpsichord drifting from his office stereo and wishing he could sit down for just a moment. But a glance at his watch—it was 7:38 P.M.—assured him that he had to keep moving.

Lindstrom reached for the crisp white shirt hanging on the doorknob. Lauren would be coming up to get him at any moment, and he had to be ready. This would be their final chance to talk before Olav went out to confront the unknown.

He smiled a small, wry smile at his melodramatic turn of thought, but it was true—he, of all people on the face of this planet, would go down in history as the first human to talk to extraterrestrial beings.

He slowly buttoned the shirt, smoothing it down, noting with detachment how frail his body felt beneath it. He'd been a big man before his heart attack eight years ago, and had easily filled out his elegant European-cut suits. But he'd lost thirty pounds on his doctor's orders, and then five more—and had gained none of it back. Now, no matter how carefully he had his suits tailored, they seemed to hang on him a bit. Lauren was always trying to fatten him up, but he seemed to have lost the hearty appetite he'd always been kidded about.

Turning his collar up, Lindstrom slid his best striped tie around his neck as he heard a light tap on the office door. "Come in," he called.

"Where are you?" It was Lauren's musical voice, a feature he'd always kidded her about. No matter how grave the crisis at hand, there was a bounce, an energy to Lauren Stewart's voice that was irrepressible. It gave even the most dolorous diplomatic pronouncements an undercurrent of optimism. Lindstrom smiled as he finished knotting his tie.

He slipped on his coat and went out into the office. "How do I look?" he asked, pausing on the threshold.

"You look fine, Olav. Very distinguished." Lauren was sitting on the modern pillow-back sofa, sipping at a mug of coffee. She was still wearing the charcoal-gray suit and light-gray turtleneck sweater she'd worn to work yesterday, but she still managed to look amazingly unrumpled. However, in the years he'd known her, Lindstrom had learned to look beyond the signs a casual observer would notice. Now he studied her face, noting the tight-pulled look of the skin about her mouth and cheekbones.

"How are you, Lauren?" he asked, sitting down beside her, his eyes worried.

"How am I?" Lauren laughed incredulously. "Olav, I've always said you're a saint, and now I believe it more than ever. *You* have to walk out there and represent Earth to the Martians—or wherever they're from—and you're worried about how I am?"

Lindstrom shrugged. "Worrying about the welfare of one's Friends is a good way to stop worrying about oneself, I've always found. I keep telling myself not to be nervous, that *beside* some of the human beings I've met—and in my seventy

years, I've met with Hitler, Stalin, and Mao—these people can't be such monsters . . ."He mused for a moment. "On the other hand, I've also met Einstein, Pope John, Mother Teresa and Albert Schweitzer."

Lauren took his hands in hers, squeezed them, then, with an exclamation, began to rub them between her own. "Cold as ice Do you want some coffee?"

"No time," he said. "Besides, it's just my nerves giving me away. Silly, isn't it?"

Not at all. At least those people you mentioned were human beings. You'd read about them, seen their faces before you had to march out to meet them. If you *weren't* nervous now, I'd take your pulse to see if you were still alive!"

He smiled at her. "Thank you, Lauren, for that little dose of much-needed common sense. Now I guess we'd better head for the roof. I must admit they've chosen a somewhat original place for a diplomatic encounter."

High above the city, Roger stood On the catwalk above the central command of his vessel. Jennifer sat at her console, busily keying in characters in her native language. To a human familiar with ancient Hebrew or Sanskrit the characters might have appeared faintly recognizable, but to anyone else they would have been totally indecipherable. The Commander waited until his third-in-command officer completed a screen full of entries before calling her name.

"Sir?" she looked up, rose, and climbed the catwalk until she faced him. "Yes, Roger?"

"Are you on shift, Jennifer?" Roger asked. "I remember seeing your name on the off-duty roster for this interval."

Jennifer nodded, phrasing her English words carefully. "You're right, Roger. I'm technically off shift. I just wanted to finish up some of my personnel evaluations and recommendations."

"Very commendable," Roger said. "You're not finding your additional duties in that area too taxing?"

"No, sir. I wouldn't have requested them if I wasn't sure they'd fit into my schedule."

"Well, I know Angela is glad to be rid of them. Personnel work is not her favorite occupation," Roger said, with just a hint of irony in his voice.

Jennifer knew better than to betray satisfaction at her superior's dig at his second-in-command. "Where is Angela, Roger?" she asked. "Shouldn't she have returned by now?"

Roger glanced at the bank of chronometers at the top of the main viewscreen. They showed the time in all of Earth's time zones, with one instrument displaying the time in their own units of measurement for any crew member who might still be confused by human time determination. "She should have arrived with the Supreme Commander by now," he said. "It's nearly 0100. She's probably taking every last second to make sure the Supreme Commander is comfortable—and to let hii know *she's* the one responsible for his comfort."

This time, Jennifer had to look away from Roger in an effort to hide her amusement. The hatch behind them slid open and Angela appeared. "The Supreme Commander—John," she announced.

The bridge crew stood, formally saluting, as John entered, acknowledging their greetings. He was shorter than Roger, with a head of thick gray hair and regular, pleasant features. He raised his voice in the dim silence of the bridge: "Please activate the Fleet communications intercom."

Jennifer hurried to obey. When she nodded to him to continue, he spoke again. "In a few minutes I will formally begin our mission here on Earth. If not for your dedication to Our Great Leader's cause, we could not have reached our goal so successfully—I commend all of you for your efforts. I know you will dedicate

yourselves to the completion of our task with the single-minded loyalty that enabled us to conserve our resources and undertake this vital mission. In the name of Our Leader, I urge all of you to rededicate your lives to that cause—the very preservation of our kind."

He paused. "The duties of a Supreme Commander, as I am sure you realize, are complicated and numerous. Therefore I will be dividing my time among all the ships in the Fleet. In my absence I hereby designate Roger, the Commander of this vessel, to be my special diplomatic deputy in charge of dealing with United Nations officials as well as with the United States government. I am sure you will give him your full cooperation "

He glanced over at Roger, who looked confident, pleased, and not the least bit humble. "Thank you, John," he said. "I know that I and all my crew will do everything possible to merit your confidence."

"I'm sure you will," said John. "Now I must excuse myself I have an important meeting to attend—a *vital* Important meeting."

Roger smiled faintly at the understatement.

"Damn," Denise Daltrey mumbled, not for the first time in the past hour. "Damn, damn, damn—double damn!"

"Don't take it so hard, Denise," Sidney, the makeup man, counseled. "At least you got the studio anchor slot tonight. I hate something."

"Yeah," agreed Denise glumly. "I get to sit in the studio and watch Kristine Walsh up there on the roof, where everything's happening. The story of a lifetime, and I'll see it secondhand, along with John Q. Public!" She shuffled her intro copy at the anchor desk while technicians checked lighting and cameras.

"Don't know why you're so pissed," Sidney said, brushing minute amounts of blusher onto the newswoman's cheekbones.

"You couldn't *pay* me to get that close to monsters from outer space."

"Pay? I'd have given a year's salary to get that story. It's the chance of a lifetime!"

"You look a little tired—have you gotten any sleep since this all started?" Sidney asked, tactfully attempting to change the subject as he patted her forehead with a puff.

Denise nodded, clasping her hands in an isometric tug of war. "Yeah. I caught a couple of hours this afternoon. Actually, I think *you've* got the toughest job of all of us, Sidney."

He stared at her, comparing her left eye with the right. "Me?" He daubed her left eyelid with shadow.

"Yeah. As we on-air types stay cooped up in this damned studio, withering away from lack of sleep and decent food, *you've* got to make us look trustworthy and alive—nobody trusts a cadaverous-looking zombie."

Sidney chuckled. "Couldn't anybody ever mistake *you* for a zombie, Denise. Eyes are perfect."

She squinted, realizing that now she wouldn't be able to rub them when they itched. "Sidney, you're a miracle worker," she said as he held up a small mirror for her.

He dabbed her forehead one last time and smoothed her bangs. Then, with a thumbs-up signal and a smile, he retreated from the brightly lit set. Denise peered past the pool of light centered on her, locating the balding pate and walrus moustache of her producer, Winston Weinberg. "Hi, Winnie. The rooftop team set?"

"Yeah," Weinberg said.

"Come talk to me and calm me down. How many minutes do we have left?"

"We'll be switching over to you, then intercutting between you and the rooftop crew in about five minutes," he answered in his heavy Brooklyn accent. "You look great, hon. Fix your jacket and sit up straight."

"Yes, mother," said Denise, making sure her suit jacket hung correctly, then straightening up and again resisting the urge to rub her tired eyes. "But it's not as though anybody's going to spare me a glance. Nobody'll even notice that I

covered this event too. Kristine Walsh will be the one everyone remembers."

"The goddamn *aliens* will be the ones everybody remembers, honey," Winnie said. "I wanted to tell you I'm sorry you crapped out on the pool assignment. I'd rather see you up there than Walsh."

"That's sweet of you, Winnie," Denise said. "But it's the luck of the draw."

"Luck of the draw, my ass," Weinberg growled. "Some-thin' stinks about the whole deal. I'd bet money she kissed up to somebody, pulled some last-minute strings, called in a few outstanding debts or something. She hasn't spent the time on this that you and Dan have."

"And they say *women* are catty," Denise said, feigning distaste. "Maybe she's doing the roof because they wanted somebody bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, not overworked and weary."

"Hmph," said Weinberg. "You ever work with her?"

"I know her, but I never worked with her."

"I have. Acts like she's the queen or somethin'. If she doesn't get her way, you can hear her from Timbuktu to Kalamazoo."

"Maybe I should take her cue. Maybe I've been too easygoing."

He wagged an admonishing finger at her. "Hey, go ahead—kid around. Put yourself down. But you're damn good, Dee, and I know it 'cause I've worked with the best. You wanna know what the scuttlebutt is about you versus Madam Kristine?" Without waiting for her to reply, he continued, "They say, 'Denise'11 do anything to get the *story*—Walsh'11 do anything to get the *glory*.' No lie, honey."

She reached across the desk to clasp his fingers with her own. "Thanks. No lie, honey."

"Thirty seconds to air time," boomed the director's voice over the loudspeaker. Hurriedly Denise composed herself, checked her posture, arranged her notes, then, finally, tested the small mike clipped to her jacket. The countdown was on.

When it reached "one," the red light on camera two flashed on, and Denise, watching the monitor, saw her image appear under the superimposed words, "*VISITORS FROM SPACE: -4 Special Report Live from New York.*"

The floor director cued her and she smoothly faced the camera. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. It is almost eight P.M. here in New York—almost time for the people of earth to meet, face to face, the first beings encountered from another planet. As we take the ball back from Dan Rather, reporting to you from the nation's capital, the air here in New York is crackling with anticipation. As you can see in this live shot from the United Nations Building, the huge space vessel is still stationary above Manhattan, where it took up residence yesterday afternoon ..."

Denise went on, recapping the highlights from the previous day, until she switched over to Kristine Walsh on the roof. Then she watched glumly as the Secretary General, accompanied by a tall, exotically attractive woman, came onto the roof. Lindstrom motioned to the UN guards to lower their weapons—then as eight o'clock arrived, Denise, along with the rest of the studio crew, fixed her eyes on the monitor showing the belly of the huge alien vessel.

"I see something!" Winnie shouted after a second.

A moment later they could all hear Kristine Walsh's cool, professional tones: "A smaller craft is dropping down out of the Mother Ship and heading directly for the rooftop of this building. As it heads toward us, it seems to be almost completely silent, with no exhaust or rocket engines to indicate its power source."

The smaller vehicle had a curiously duck-billed snout and gleamed whitely as it came to rest on the top of the UN Building. Noting its aerodynamic lines, Denise commented that it seemed to have been designed to fly, at least partly, in the atmosphere. Her remark earned her an approving thumbs-up gesture from Winnie. They all noticed a pattern of dots and bars painted in red on the nose of the craft, vaguely suggesting a letter or other symbol.

After a second, a hatch opened in the side of the craft and a ramp extended onto the rooftop. A voice, amplified yet still containing that odd reverberation they'd all noticed during the countdown, spoke: "Herr General Secreterare ..."

"I think that's Swedish," Denise said to Winston, knowing she wasn't on the air at the moment. "Get me a translation— quick!"

After a second, the translation came through, and Denise relayed it to Kristine Walsh on the roof. "Mr. Secretary General ... do not be afraid. Please climb the ramp."

Denise watched closely as Lindstrom, with a barely perceptible hesitation, stepped forward. The roof camera, wielded by free-lance cameraman Mike Donovan, followed the slender, erect figure as it moved forward up the ramp, vanishing into the darkened opening of the shuttle.

Denise checked the seconds on the studio clock while keeping one eye on Donovan's closeup of the hatch— 68 ... 69 ... 70 ... 71 ... 72 ... 73 . . .

"There he is!" cried Kristine Walsh, and Denise felt a huge surge of relief.

Pausing on the bottom of the ramp, Lindstrom spoke, assuring the assembly that he had indeed met the Visitors (as Lindstrom termed them) and that they looked very human, although their voices were unusual. He stressed that they wished to honor all the United Nations covenants and that their mission was peaceful. He then announced that he'd asked the Supreme Commander of the Fleet, who was aboard the shuttle, to address the people of Earth personally.

Booted feet appeared on the ramp, and in silence, Denise and the studio crew watched a gray-haired man with regular, i minded features appear, smiling genially. "Christ!" Denise exclaimed, for once forgetting to check whether she was on the air she wasn't. "The guy could pass for one of us!"

The Visitor wore a red uniform resembling a flight-deck i overall, with a chest flap across which extended several black stripes. Denise guessed they denoted rank. As the humans watched, the man took out a pair of dark glasses, slipped them on, then said, "I trust you will forgive me, but our eyes are unaccustomed to this sort of brightness." His English was unaccented. If it weren't for the eerie

multitrack resonating tonality in the voice, Denise thought, the man could be a native American.

he continued, still with a faint smile, "As the Secretary General told you, we have come in peace to all mankind on Earth. Our planet is the fourth from the star which you call Sirius, some 8.7 light-years from your Earth. This is the first time we have journeyed from our system—you, the first intelligent life we have encountered. We are very pleased to meet you!"

The sigh rippling through the studio was profound with relief. The Supreme Commander continued: "Our names would sound peculiar to you, so we—my fellow Visitors and I -have chosen simple names from Earth. My name is John."

Denise stared, fascinated by the thought of a being from another star who could look so devastatingly familiar. John went on to explain that unmanned Sirian probes had been monitoring Earth's radio and television broadcasts for a number of years, which is how the aliens had learned the local languages. One of the phrases he used was "this small fleet"—prompting Denise to glance over at Winston Weinberg. "*Small fleet?*" she echoed incredulously. "Who the hell does he think he's kidding?"

"Shh," said Winnie. "Let the guy make his pitch."

"On behalf of Our Great Leader—he who governs our planet with benevolence and wisdom—we have come because we need your help." John paused for a second. Denise could appreciate the Visitor's innate dramatic ability—he'd make a terrific editorial spokesperson, she thought irrelevantly.

She heard Winnie snort disbelievingly. "They have the ability to cross *nine* light-years and they want *our* help?"

Almost as if he'd heard the producer's comment, John explained, "Our planet is in serious environmental difficulty—far, far worse than yours, it's reached a stage where we'll be unable to survive without immediate assistance. There are certain chemical compounds that can save our struggling civilization. We need to manufacture them. You can help us. And in return, we'll gladly share with you all the fruits of our knowledge. Now that contact is established, we would like to meet with individual governments so that we may present requests for certain

operating plants around the world to be retooled for the manufacture of the compounds."

Denise looked over at Winston, then at the other men and women in the studio, feeling a sudden anxiety. *Lord, she thought, these people are so far ahead of us technologically— and yet they're still struggling to survive? What does that bode for us in the coming decades?*

John was still speaking, almost as though addressing her worries. "... helping you solve your own environmental, agricultural, and health dilemmas. Then we'll leave you as we came—in peace."

They're talking as though they can cure most of what ails us, Denise mused. *So why can't they help themselves?* The answer was obvious, she realized almost immediately. The more complex and technical the civilization, the more complex the environmental chain holding it all together. She watched as John extended an offer for the Secretary General and five journalists to accompany him on a tour of the Mother Ship, and saw, with no surprise, that Kristine Walsh was among those lucky five.

Must've picked them by lot somehow. Damn, I'd give ten years of my life to be in her shoes . . .

The chosen journalists—Kristine, Sam Egan, Michael Donovan and his soundman, Tony Wah Chong Leonetti, plus an old friend of Denise's, Jeri Taylor—all moved quickly toward the ramp, pausing to shake hands with John on their way up. Denise saw the cue and, feeling as though her voice were coming all the way from Sirius, automatically picked up the narrative.

The hatch on the gleaming white shuttle closed, then, as soundlessly as it had arrived, the vehicle lifted off. Denise watched as it glided upward into the spotlight sky above Manhattan, toward the glistening, looming bulk of the Mother Ship. A hundred bits of reporter's small talk ran through her mind, but she swallowed them all, letting the picture speak for itself.

Chapter 4

Party Time

Alison Stein sipped cautiously at a glass of white wine as she watched the majordomo, Enrico Caldera, move steadily but unobtrusively to Mayor O'Connor's side. For a portly man in his fifties, Caldera was a tribute to quiet grace and gentility, in huge contrast to O'Connor, who was laughing boisterously at a joke Alexander Garr had just told. The majordomo gained the minuscule space next to O'Connor's right elbow and whispered discreetly, "Mr. Mayor—I think the guests of honor may be arriving."

It was obvious Caldera hoped to avoid a stir, and Alison found it necessary to mask a smile when O'Connor grinned at the man and quipped, "Hey, great! The E.T.'s are here!"

Enrico Caldera rolled his eyes as everyone except he and Alison stampeded for the doors to Gracie Mansion. Alison flashed the little man an understanding look. Somehow O'Connor's flamboyance seemed to diminish Gracie Mansion's fading elegance even more quickly than time and budget deficits.

The crowd milled back from the doors with a swelling murmur of disappointment to let a distinguished-looking older black man and a tall, exotically lovely young woman enter; accompanying UN Secretary General Olav Lindstrom. Alison recognized the man as Dr. George Stewart, and guessed the young woman to be his daughter, Lauren. Alison caught Enrico's eye. "Did you do that deliberately, Enrico?"

Caldera shook his head innocently. "Not me, Mrs. Stein. I saw this big limo pull up and all I could think was, it must be them."

Hearing a soft displacement of air from the direction of the open French side door, Alison turned to see a white shuttle—smaller than the one they'd seen that night two weeks ago, but modeled on identical lines—touch down on the grass. She moved toward the door just as somebody shouted, "Hey, look!"

A tall, ruggedly handsome man with curling brown hair and green eyes moved out of the hatchway, followed by two female Visitors. The first woman was petite and blonde, with coolly pretty features and vivid aquamarine eyes, in contrast to the other, who was taller, heavier-boned, with a rounded face,

reddish-auburn hair, freckles, and hazel eyes. The Mayor was waiting for them as they entered, his hand outstretched in greeting. "I'm Mayor Daniel O'Connor. Welcome to Gracie Mansion. We're honored you folks could join us."

The crowd made a half-circle around O'Connor, Alison, and the Visitors as the aliens shook hands with the Mayor and City Council President. Alison was struck by the coolness of their flesh—not a clammy coldness, but more as if their natural body temperature were significantly lower than the human norm. "I see John isn't with you," O'Connor said.

"No, Mr. Mayor;" the male Visitor said. "He sends his apologies. As Supreme Commander, he has many, many responsibilities, as I'm sure you can imagine. My name is Roger, and this is my second-in-command, Angela." He indicated the young woman with the blonde ponytail, "and my third-in-command, Jennifer. Jennifer is the Fleet's special adviser on interplanetary cultural matters."

The crowd parted to allow Olav Lindstrom through, with Lauren Stewart at his side. Greetings went around the group. Alison was struck by the contrast between the Visitors in their red coveralls and the other guests glittering in evening dress.

O'Connor gestured grandly at the party room. "Please, come in. Lots of people are dying to meet you, and you must be hungry. Dinner won't be served until eight-thirty, but those tables have enough snacks to keep us going until then. The bar is over there."

"Thank you very much," Roger said politely, "but actually, we've already eaten prior to coming down. Our scientists haven't yet completed their analysis of your planet's flora and fauna, so they've advised us not to partake until we're told it's safe. Just a precaution, I'm sure."

O'Connor nodded understandingly. "Sure, makes perfect sense. I do the same thing when I'm in Mexico. Stuff you can pick up down there can clean you out but good."

Danny! Alison hoped fervently none of the United Nations representatives from Mexico were in earshot. Blushing for the oblivious O'Connor, she saw Lauren Stewart glance at Olav Lindstrom. Hastily, Alison tried to think of something to

say, but the moment was already past.

Three Visitors weren't many to go around, but they circulated gamely among the pockets of guests, splitting up to make sure no one of importance was ignored—not an easy task, since the guest list constituted a virtual who's who of New York.

"They almost act like they're running for office," O'Connor whispered to Alison as they watched the party. "They handle the old glad-handing routine better than I do."

Alison gave him a sideways look. "And they're less obvious about it too."

He ignored the dig. "They seem to recognize and know something about everyone they're talking to. I wonder how?"

"Well, they said they had probes monitoring our communications. I guess they did their homework."

"It's more than that, more than just news media information," O'Connor insisted, mopping at his glistening forehead with a billowing square of linen. "They know things they could only have discovered by digging through newspaper files or pumping people for information."

"Pumping people?" She gave him a look. "Why such negative terms? Maybe it's a compliment—they're going to be here, living among us for a while. Maybe they'd just like to know more about what makes us tick."

"But why, Ali, *why*? We've already agreed to help them. Why so much interest in finding out about prominent people? I can only think of one . . ." He trailed off with a frown.

"And what reason is that, O wise and sage politician?"

"My, we have a sarcastic tongue about us tonight, don't we?" O'Connor sniffed. "I'll tell you anyway, 'cause it's something you might need to know someday. When you know enough things about people, you may find out some of their weaknesses, enabling you, in many cases, to *control* them."

Alison finished her wine in a single gulp, then grabbed another glass off a passing tray. "You're paranoid, Danny." She glanced around the room. "And judging by the way most people are reacting to the Visitors, I'd keep my unpopular opinions to myself, if I were you." She moved off to mingle, leaving O'Connor to chew over her warning.

"Look at Alexander the Great," Peter Forsythe whispered to the Yankees' manager, Bobby Neal.

"Why?" said Neal in his lazy Oklahoma drawl. "He's my boss, I'm his employee. That means I have to look at him all season. I need a vacation from him by this time each year." He crunched experimentally on an hors d'oeuvre.

"He's right over there—you can't miss him," Pete insisted, pointing with his chin. "He's the one with the egg-sucking grin pasted all over that iron mask of his."

The older man stood on tiptoe, craning his neck, causing the white shirtfront and jacket of his ancient tux to strain noticeably across his paunch. "I see him," Neal said in an answering undertone. "I think he's trying to pick up that Visitor chick. She's cute, ain't she?"

"He's sucking up to all of 'em," Pete mumbled, his eyes following one of the waiters as he took a loaded tray off the bar. "Sonofabitch can't be decent to the humans who work for him, yet butter wouldn't melt when he talks to a bunch of aliens. Disgusting."

Bobby Neal turned to look at Forsythe questioningly. "You been drinking, Pete?"

"Hell no, Bobby!" Forsythe protested, not meeting his friend's eyes. "Just one little glass of wine, that's it."

"Well, it better stop there," said Neal, not unkindly. "You'd better watch it, especially with Alex here."

Pete nibbled viciously at a knish impaled on a toothpick. His eyes were inexorably drawn back to the bar. *One more glass of wine won't hurt*, he thought. *I'll wait awhile. That'll prove I can control it. Nobody gets into trouble on two glasses of white wine!*

"Damn," Neal said, "he's waving to us."

Forsythe began to turn away, but Neal grabbed his arm. "Pete, the man pays us. You've gotta be civil."

"Hey, Bobby, Pete," Alexander Garr called to them. "C'mon over here!"

Pete's feet remained rooted to the floor; but Neal tightened his grip on the third baseman's arm and towed him along. "Button that lip, Peter" Neal said. "The boss doesn't look like he's in the mood for any of your cynical remarks tonight."

"Right," said Pete. "Tonight is unusual. Ordinarily he's just sucking up to politicians from Earth—this is his first chance to do it to politicians from Sirius. Far be it from *me* to interfere."

Bobby Neal elbowed his third baseman in the ribs with a sudden jab, causing Pete to let out a surprised "Oof!" and shut up. Having diabetes and a bad heart may have slowed the older man down a bit, but he could still take his players firmly in hand when he felt the need.

Garr greeted his employees with a broad smile. "Boys, I'd like you to meet Angela, second-in-command of the New York Mother Ship. Angela, this is Bobby Neal, the best manager in major league baseball, and one of my star players, Pete Forsythe."

Neal extended his hand. "It's a pleasure, ma'am."

Peter nodded politely but remained silent, and Garr flashed him a warning look. Turning quickly, Forsythe snagged a glass of wine from a tray and sipped it slowly, his blue eyes wide and innocent.

"We understand baseball and other sports are very important among your people," Angela said.

"Yes, indeed, ma'am," Neal answered. "Got me outta the oil fields when I was a kid. I didn't get much of an education, but look where I am today. Sports have always been a way for a boy with the right determination and athletic skills to better himself. Builds character and a sense of responsibility in *all* kids, even if they don't get to be professional athletes."

"That's very interesting," Angela said, nodding. "Mr. Garr and I were just talking about that, as a matter of fact—building character in youth. We believe it's very important for you to get to know us better, and we would like our visit to your world to be an educational experience—a character-building experience—for your young people."

"May I make a suggestion, Angela?" asked Garr

"Of course."

Alex struck an inspirational pose as he paused for a dramatic <ronde, and Bobby Neal nudged Peter. "I think I can get the Mayor and the City Council to agree to open Yankee Stadium, one of the shrines of American sports, to help you in your outreach program to young people—the poor and disadvantaged youngsters as well as boys and girls who have had more opportunities in life. I'd like to offer our ballpark, *and* the services of some of my star players as counselors, to assist the efforts you people are making in establishing these Visitor Friends groups you mentioned."

Angela looked duly impressed and deeply grateful. "Why, Mr. Garr, that's a *wonderful* idea. I saw your stadium from the air. It's big enough to land our squad vehicles there and we can co-sponsor gatherings between our people and your youngsters—"

"What we call an 'open house,' Angela." Garr's enthusiasm was expanding by the second. "It will be perfect. We can also set up evening meetings at armories around the city—mix informal sports with discussions and lectures. What do you think, Bobby?"

"Uh, well ... I think it sounds just dandy. I think the kids'll jump at the chance, 'specially if they get to go up in one of those squad vehicles."

Angela laughed. "That's part of what I was envisioning."

Garr nodded at Neal and Forsythe, then, putting an arm around her waist, steered Angela off to meet another group. As they moved away, he continued, "We used to have a thing called 'Hands Across the Water,' a sort of exchange of ideas and culture with countries across our oceans. This will be the same, except that it's

'Hands Across the Stars.' It'll be a *fantastic* opportunity to—"

Pete watched them go, then shook his head. "Alexander the Great has made another conquest—this time an interstellar one. My God, that man can get in good with anybody—anybody who can help him grab headlines and show what a terrific guy he is. I think the sucker's got political aspirations, I really do." He took a final gulp of wine, looking disgusted. "Can't you see tomorrow's *Post* —'Yankees Owner Interstellar Philanthropist'?"

"I think you got it backwards, Pete," Bobby Neal said softly, watching the unlikely pair consideringly.

"Huh?"

"That Angela spotted Alex a mile away and knew she could use him for somethin' like this."

"What do you mean, Bobby?"

"The Visitors need folks like Alex—people who can show 'em the way to make friends with us Earth people, to get in good with us, show us what good ole boys they are."

"And you call *me* cynical?" Pete snorted.

"Oh, I didn't say their intentions were bad. I just said I could see through what they're doin'."

"Some of us in the cultural-relations field worried that the human religions would have problems accepting our existence, knowing it would prove you aren't the only intelligent beings in the universe, but most faiths seem to have taken it much better than we anticipated," Jennifer commented. "Of course we're delighted it turned out this way."

"Scripture doesn't prepare us for an occasion like this," said Edward Cardinal Palazzo, the Archbishop of New York. "Unless you want to look at generalizations like the first line of the Bible. 'In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth . . .' Or later, when it says, 'He made the stars also . . .' If you take it in that context, then you Visitors have as much right to be here as we

do." He smiled at the auburn-haired Visitor warmly, fingering the gold crucifix on his neck chain. His black vestments hid his small, wiry frame, but couldn't completely disguise his balanced athletic grace. Eddie Palazzo had been a bantamweight boxer while growing up on the Lower East Side. Now, despite his gray hair, he looked far younger than his fifty-three years.

"How do you perceive the way your people have reacted to our arrival?" she asked.

"Everything from joy to despair. For some it was a terrible shock, for others it seemed the fulfillment of a dream." He smiled, revealing beautiful teeth.

"Nothing that faith in God can't handle."

"You put a lot of faith in your god, Cardinal Palazzo."

"That's the name of the game, at least in my business. What about religion on your world, Jennifer? How did it prepare you

for coping with the fact that *you* weren't alone in the universe?"

"Science prepared us. The religions that existed on our world have mostly faded into items of historical interest—they have little impact on modern life."

Cardinal Palazzo expressed concern. "Don't you Visitors believe in anything greater than science? Where do you think the elements science has discovered came from?"

"Oh, we believe in a greater force—nature, the shaper of the universe. I must admit," Jennifer said thoughtfully, "that I've made sort of an amateur study of your religions, and I was one of the ones who expected more upheaval and fear upon our arrival—the arrival of alien beings outside creation as you've perceived it for all your recorded history."

"Ah—" The Cardinal smiled. "That was your error, if you don't mind my correcting your view of earthly religion. You and your people are *not* outside our sweep of creation and belief. Remember, God created the heavens, the earth, and the stars, as I told you. That makes *you* part of what He created— granted, from

a part of the heavens very far away and outside our admittedly very limited experience. But we, as human beings with our short life spans and finite minds, will never have experienced everything God has created. God and His power are, by definition, infinite. So that's why the Church has no trouble accepting and welcoming you, since you come in peace. To us, you're just newly discovered children of God."

Jennifer smiled wryly. "Kind of like long-lost relatives?"

Palazzo laughed heartily. "Exactly! That's a very good way of putting it! I might even steal that for a sermon."

"Thou shalt not steal," quoted Jennifer.

"Hmm—you *have* studied, haven't you?" He smiled at her warmly. "Very well then, will you loan it to me?"

She returned the smile. "I'd be honored."

"That's Peter Forsythe over there on the other side of the room," George Stewart said to his daughter. "He seems to be drifting over in this direction."

Lauren made a face. "Then I think it's time for me to powder my nose."

"Too late, he's seen us. Come on, Lauren, he's one of my best students. I don't know why you don't like him."

"When I met him at that New Year's Eve party, he was drunk as a skunk and a cynic to beat all. He tried to pick up every girl there, and that was while he was still married."

"Oh, he's pretty much got the drinking under control now that he and Jean have actually split up. The months just before and after their separation were pretty rough on Pete, but he's a good guy under all that sarcasm—trust me. And as I recall, you were the one who turned a cold shoulder at that party."

"I'm always chilly to cynical drunks who make a million dollars a year and have no reason on earth to *be* cynical drunks."

"Shh—"

"Hi, Doc!" Pete gave George a lopsided grin, his blue eyes a little too bright.

"Good to see you. And nice to see—" He blinked, embarrassed, obviously drawing a blank over Lauren's name.

"You remember my daughter, Lauren," said Dr. Stewart, smoothly stepping into the breach.

"Of course," Pete said. "Could I forget one of the most attractive women in New York?"

"Apparently," murmured Lauren, *sotto voce*. George shot her a warning glance, but the remark went over Pete's somewhat fuddled head.

"Well, Pete, have you met the Visitors?" asked Dr. Stewart.

"Briefly," Forsythe said, finishing his glass of wine and looking around for a refill. "They're so much like us they're a little hard to swallow, don't you think?"

"What do you mean?" asked Lauren, challenge plain in her voice.

Pete fumblingly tried to explain. "I dunno. They're just so attentive and complimentary to *everyone*, and they smile all the time. Reminds me of some Hollywood producers I met while I was doing some commercials out there. Guys would treat you like you were the most important person in the world to them, hanging on your every word, then as soon as you weren't standing there to hear 'em, the suckers would ream you out but good, still grinning all the while. Lie right to your face and then stick it to you, like half the politicians and damn diplomats in this world."

Lauren stiffened, a dangerous light flickering in her dark

eyes. George hastened to temporize. "Take it easy, Pete. Remember, Lauren works for the UN."

"Oh, right." Pete had the grace to blush. "Sorry, I wasn't talking about the UN. Everyone knows they're trying to help, not mess the world over. Too bad they don't have much clout."

Lauren gave her father an I-told-you-so look, and George made a conciliatory little gesture, accompanied by a shrug.

The silence lengthened toward awkwardness. Pete smiled winningly at Lauren and tried again. "If you don't mind my saying so, that's a very pretty dress you're wearing, Ms. Stewart," Forsythe said, his eyes traveling over the white silk gown that dramatically bared one of Lauren's slender shoulders. "Not every woman could wear a dress like that. It's sort of . . . what's the word? Daring, or something. You wonder , what holds it up."

Lauren smiled fractionally, her eyes distant. "Thank you. I think."

George Stewart coughed suddenly, apparently having swallowed the wrong way. Pete helpfully pounded the older man on the back. In a strangled voice, Stewart announced his intention to get a drink of water, and left. When Pete turned around, Lauren was nowhere to be seen.

Alison Stein eased back into the overstuffed chair in Dan O'Connor's study next to the party room and gingerly slipped her high heels off with a sigh. Her nylon-clad toes wiggled gratefully as she propped her feet on a hassock.

"Rough night on the piggies, eh, Ali?" asked the Mayor from behind her. He balanced a cup of coffee on a tray which the City Council President accepted with a look of profound thanks.

"I'm so glad you don't give these shindigs more than a couple of times a year, Danny," she said, busily taking her heavy silver-and-opal bracelet off and detaching her matching earrings. "I hate getting into long dresses and jewelry."

"But you look so great when you get dressed up, Ali," O'Connor said, looking down at her with frank admiration, his blue eyes holding a sudden warmth. "I think I ought to make all City Council meetings formal-dress occasions."

"Over my dead body," Ali said, resting her head against the back of the chair, careless of the heavy mass of her coiffure.

She avoided his gaze, suddenly conscious of a new current between them. O'Connor had been a widower for several years now, and she'd never seen him show even the slightest interest in women. It was doubly disconcerting now to

realize his new awareness was aimed at *her*.

They were both quiet for a moment, and when Stein cast a cautious look up at O'Connor, he was staring into the fire. "The party went pretty well," she said. "I'm glad you seem to be in a better mood about our guests of honor. Lost your paranoia about the Visitors trying to usurp your power or something?"

O'Connor gave her an impatient look. "Cut it out, Ali. I'm not paranoid, and it's not *my* power I'm worried about. And if anything, I'm *more* worried." He sat down on the arm of her chair and dropped his voice confidentially. "They were so goddamned charming to everyone here tonight—the more important the person, the more charming they became."

"Would you have been happier if they'd been grotesque, insulting, and hostile? Would that have made them the perfect dinner guests?"

"They were *too* charming, Ali. I've been in the business too long not to recognize a snow job when I see it. They wooed civic leaders, business leaders, communications moguls—even the Cardinal! They didn't miss a trick. I even saw Roger working on Dan Rather and John Chancellor."

"What about Denise Daltrey? Didn't I see her too?"

"Yeah, they didn't miss anyone. They practically charmed the bunions off all of New York's television VIP's."

"Don't tell me you're worried about people like Chancellor, Rather, and Daltrey losing their objectivity over a little dinner chitchat?"

"No, but they may be the *only* ones whose heads weren't turned here tonight."

"Excuse me, Mr. Mayor." Angela's precise reverberating tones came from the doorway behind them. O'Connor jumped, startled, nearly falling off his precarious perch on the chair arm.

Where the hell did she come from? Alison wondered. Did she overhear Danny's tirade? Oh, shit!

Both Mayor and City Council President stood and turned as Angela smiled

warmly at them. "I'm sorry I startled you.

Roger asked me to extend good nights for all of us. We have to be getting back, but we enjoyed the evening so much."

Well," said O'Connor, shaking her hand, "we're delighted you could take time to drop by. We didn't realize any of the quests were still here—good heavens," he looked at his watch, "it's nearly three!"

"Yes, it's a late hour for us too. But we so enjoyed meeting everyone. And we're grateful for your cooperation on that Visitor Friends project I've suggested. We're very anxious to get started."

"Alison and I are at your service, Angela. Good night."

"Good night, Mayor O'Connor, Mrs. Stein."

They stood in the doorway, looking out across the party room, watching Angela join Roger and Jennifer at the door. The Visitors nodded a final farewell to the few stragglers still left, and then they were gone.

Alison glared at O'Connor. "Well, Danny, your tongue certainly leads a life of its own, unfettered by your feeble brain. Evil incarnate, that's what she is, obviously!"

O'Connor shrugged, grinning ruefully. "Open mouth, insert foot."

The three Visitors strolled toward their squad vehicle. "I think that went rather well," Roger said. "We made contact with many of the people we'll need to accomplish this mission. I'm glad you made such a good start with the president of

CBS."

"And we learned who may *not* be so cooperative," Angela said softly. "I got the distinct impression Peter Forsythe was only here under duress, and Mayor O'Connor, I think, definitely presents a problem. In my opinion we should consider our options regarding the Mayor."

Jennifer stopped to look at her. "Oh come on, Angela. Aren't you talking in terms that are rather . . . extreme?"

The blonde officer's voice was harsh beneath the alien reverberation. "Nothing can be allowed to interfere with the requirements of our mission. If certain individuals constitute obstacles, those obstacles will have to be . . . eliminated."

Chapter 5

Make New Friends, Lose the Old

Joey Vitale turned his sparkling white Corvette onto the Brooklyn block of neat well-tended brownstones where his parents lived. He drove slowly, his window down, talking to the neighborhood kids who ran down the sidewalk to wave to him.

"Hey, Joey! Long time no see!" called a fourteen-year-old girl in a down vest and leg warmers.

"Hey, Gena, you're gettin' prettier every day!"

"Hey, Joey!" a dark-haired boy yelled, jogging beside the car, "you gonna play football with us today?"

"Maybe later, Johnny. First I gotta go watch the Visitors land at the plant with my mom and pop."

He swung into the driveway and parked behind the custom camper van. Antonio Vitale, a tall beefy man with a beard and moustache, leaned out the side door of the house. "Hey, Joey! Hurry up! Mama's making pancakes for you!"

"Great, Pop. I'm starving." Unfolding his lanky frame from the sports car in careful stages, he climbed out, slammed the door, and stood looking at the street with a grin. Joey still sometimes missed living at home, though his luxurious Manhattan apartment had its obvious advantages. He took a long stride toward the house.

"Hi, Joey," said a quiet voice from the house next door.

Vitale turned, peering into the shadows of the porch, then smiled tentatively at the young woman sitting on the top step.

She was small, with taffy-brown hair and pert features, and was wearing a Yankees sweatshirt and much-faded jeans. "Hi, Marianne. Good to see you."

Hesitantly, Joey crossed the narrow strip of lawn as she came down the steps toward him. He stopped about four feet away, wondering if hugging her would be the right thing to do. "Hey, you look really great. How you been?" No hug.

Simultaneously, she said, "I haven't seen you in months. How've you been?"

They broke off, then laughed. "You first," said Joey.

"Well, I've been pretty good. Studying hard. Grad school keeps me pretty busy. Your turn."

"Same here. We didn't make the play-offs," he shrugged. "But maybe next year. I see you still got the sweatshirt I gave you."

"I've still got everything you gave me," she said, instantly looking as though she wished she could have taken the words back. "Uh, that's some nice camper you gave your folks."

"Yeah, well, Pop always wanted one. And with all the money Alex Garr pays me, the least I can do is make sure Mom and Pop have what they want. They're takin' a trip to Italy next summer."

"That's nice. Are you . . . still seeing that girl? Leslie?"

He glanced over at his car, then down at his Adidas. "Nah. All she was really interested in was going to parties and gettin' expensive presents. Too highfalutin for me. *You* know what I like—a thick shake, a coupla burgers . . . and a good martial arts or horror flick—that's me."

"Yeah, I know," she said, not without irony. "You must not have much trouble meeting girls, though."

"Ahhh, they're all baseball Annies, just hangin' around the hotels and bars. I

tried it a couple of times. Not my style. I'd rather watch the late movies and go to sleep by myself, or sit around and talk baseball with Pete and Bobby Neal." He met her eyes squarely. "Why'd you want to know?"

"I don't know. 'Cause I still care about you, I guess. You're a nice guy. Too nice, sometimes. People—women—take advantage of you."

"Not lately," he said with a tinge of bitterness. Then, more hesitantly, "I thought about calling."

"Joey ..." She looked down, wrapping her hands in the gray folds of the sweatshirt.

"Mare . . ." He paused, then plunged ahead. "Couldn't we try it again?"

She looked up at him for a long second, then shook her head hopelessly. "Nothing's changed. There're still all those nights you'd be on the road and I'd still be Joey's little woman, sitting in the stands, cheering you at the home games. I just don't think I could live like that."

"That's not forever,'you know," he said more roughly than he'd intended. "I got enough money. I could retire by the time I'm thirty and never have to work again. Pete's helped me invest it, and I'm learning how to manage it right. Then we'd have the rest of our lives together. No road trips, no baseball Annie's tryin' to put the make on me."

"And you'd always feel that if you'd played another five years, you'd be a Hall of Fame candidate. I can't ask you to give up what you love for me. Besides," she sighed, "I'm almost done with my degree. I want to work for a while before I settle down. Date some other guys. Since we were kids, there's only been you in my life."

"*Jo-eeey!*" Antonio bellowed. Joey stepped back until his father could see him.

"Be there in a minute, Pop."

"Oh! Okay, son, sorry." The elder Vitale disappeared.

"See?" Joey looked back at Marianne. "They're still hoping we'll get back

together. They love you, Mare."

"And I love them," she said, trying not to give in. "It's just—I don't know, Joey. You know I'll always care about you, but I just don't—"

He didn't want her to say anything final, so he gently interrupted, giving her that famous smile. "I won't push you. But promise me you'll think it over, huh?"

"*Jo-eeeey!*" This time it was his mother's singsong from the kitchen window. "The pancakes are getting cold. Bring Marianne in with you—I got plenty."

Joey and Marianne looked at each other. He rolled his eyes. "She could announce at the stadium without the PA system."

They finally managed to smile, sharing the first really comfortable moment since they'd started to chat. "Well, I never could turn down your mom's pancakes." She linked her arm through his and they headed for Joey's house.

"Denise," said the voice in her earphone. "Camera two in live . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one ..."

The demanding red light flicked on and Denise smiled into the lens. "Good morning and welcome back to our second hour of the Morning News. Once again I'm going solo because **the** Visitors continue to be a round-the-clock, round-the-world story, and our staff of correspondents have been shuttling around the globe, giving you the most comprehensive coverage possible.

"Four days ago, history was made in Visitor-Earth relations when work began at assorted chemical plants around the planet, work designed to retool the plants for processing the Visitors' life-saving chemical." She turned toward the monitor behind the anchor desk. "We thought this would be a good time to give you a quick review of the past two and a half unprecedented weeks in our world's history."

On the monitor, images of the giant ships hovering over world capitals unreeled, then the videotape of Mike Donovan's initial tour of the New York Mother Ship appeared. Denise narrated: "The day after the alien saucers arrived, we finally saw the interiors of these massive space vehicles and found them not all that different from our own largest aircraft carriers—at least at first glance." The

monitor ran quickly over shots of blue-gray walls, dimly lit hangars filled with gleaming white shuttles and squad vehicles, with red-coveredalled Visitors bustling to attend to them.

The screen flickered, then filled with Kristine Walsh's familiar features, and beside her another woman—dark-haired, imperiously beautiful, with a figure that even the red coveralls couldn't conceal. "We met Diana," Denise continued her voice-over, "Supreme Commander John's second-in-command for the enormous Visitor Fleet, who has subsequently resumed command of the Los Angeles ship in her capacity as science officer for the expedition. Incidentally, our scientists are very curious about the huge ships' gravity drive, which we've been told takes up nearly half their interior. The Mother Ships also have enormous refrigerated holds designed for storage of the compound manufactured here on Earth. As nearly as we've been able to guess—and we've been given no specific numbers—the crew of *each* of the fifty or so ships in the Fleet numbers from *three to five thousand* Visitors."

Denise turned away from the monitor. "Yesterday I went with a camera crew to visit the opening of a chemical plant located right here in Brooklyn, New York—the borough famous for Coney Island, foot-long hotdogs, and, of course, the old Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team. We were given a guided tour of the facility as the work begun earlier in the week progressed. But first here's what it looked like that first day when the Visitors came to Brooklyn . . ."

As Denise continued her voice-over, the tape showed three large Visitor shuttlecraft landing on the football-field-sized parking lot then disgorging wave upon wave of red-coveredalled workers and technicians, all under the watchful eyes of mounted police and area residents.

Denise watched herself appear onscreen with Roger while a Visitor shuttle lifted off behind them with nearly soundless efficiency. The plant was visible behind it, its smokestacks looming overhead, lengths of tube and pipe threading in and out, hugging the concrete slab walls.

"Roger," her onscreen image asked, "as Commander and supervisor of the operations that will begin at this plant today, were you surprised by the greeting you received from the people who live here in Brooklyn?" Denise's videotaped image held the cordless mike closer to the Visitor officer to catch his reply.

"Surprised? In what way?"

"Well, elsewhere in this country, your ships have been greeted with marching bands and an almost festive sideshow atmosphere. But here in Brooklyn, while hundreds of residents *did* turn out to watch, they were much more reserved—as if they had yet to pass judgment on whether they approve of the Visitor activities in their area."

Roger gave his best boyish grin. "I see what you're getting at. No, Denise, that doesn't worry me. I was warned that New Yorkers are tough—and I mean that in the best possible sense. They're honest and protective of their neighbors, so it's natural they'd be concerned about a large force of outside—and I do mean *outside*—" he grinned again, "workers and technicians coming here."

The scene cut to a sidewalk interview with an elderly man wearing a baseball cap and windbreaker. "We never liked having the plant here to begin with," he was saying, "but we learned to live with it. Now these Visitors are doing who-KNOWS-what to it. What if they ruin it for other uses, or pollute the air and ocean? This is *our* beach here, y'know."

Roger's concerned face appeared again. "Rest assured that we won't be doing anything to endanger the community. In fact, our manufacturing process is much safer than the chemical processing you humans were doing here previously. Much of what we're doing at this plant is simply desalinating seawater to use in our cooling and refining process. You see, Denise, when you consider that we're going to be using cryogenic techniques, it's easy to see that—"

Denise smilingly nodded her head as Roger authoritatively—and nearly incomprehensibly—began on the technical problems of using supercooled substances in chemical processing. Finally she held up a forestalling hand. "I'm sure there are many members of our audience who are following you perfectly, Roger, but others of us, myself included, lost you on the first sentence. Perhaps you can illustrate what you're talking about during our tour?"

The camera followed Denise and Roger through the plant while her voice-over continued: "Unfortunately, we didn't discover a great deal about the nature of the Visitor chemical processes during our tour. The consultants we'd brought with us were able to glean only a little more from the highly scientific jargon the Visitor

technicians employed."

Her voice hesitated. "But getting answers to our questions at all posed more of a problem than comprehending any answers we received. Many of our questions were deferred with promises to get back to us with information at some later date, and many of us were left to ponder this increasing evidence of the Visitor high technology and scientific superiority."

Then the poised videotaped Denise stood alone, mike in hand, hair windblown, in front of the plant. "There is a definite wariness apparent here in the sea breezes of Brooklyn, as those who live near the chemical plant watch and wait. This is Denise Daltrey, on location, here in Brooklyn." The recorded voice cut with the image and the monitor blanked. Denise turned back to her audience. "We'll be right back after these messages."

The red light blinked off, and the director's voice boomed over the loudspeaker, "Denise, pick up the phone. It's the president."

"Of the United States?" Denise gasped.

"Of the *network*."

She cocked an eyebrow at Winston Weinberg as he leaned against the end of the anchor desk. "You think the shit just hit the fan?" she asked.

"You'll know in a second," he said.

Denise reached for the phone. "Yes, sir?" She listened for a second. "Yes, I'm free after the broadcast. And I think Mr. Weinberg is too." She hesitated. "A meeting? Well, we have a lot of work to do before tomorrow's—" She winced and bit her lip. "Yes, sir. Yes, sir, we'll be there."

She slowly put the receiver back into its cradle.

"Well?" asked Weinberg.

"He wanted to know why we were picking on the Visitors and how we could have aired such a suspicious, unfriendly, potentially divisive report. Where's our sense of priorities? he wants to know." She twiddled her fingers against the stack

of notes at her spot on the anchor desk. "He'll have all our heads on silver platters if the News Division doesn't shape up and fly right—starting *now*."

Weinberg smoothed his droopy moustache. "He said all that?"

"He talks quickly when he's pissed off, Winnie." Denise tried to smile but didn't succeed. "Actually, I think 'enraged' is a better word."

The producer shook his head. "That dumb sonofabitch. He's network president because he's an accountant, and he has the balls to tell us how we should cover the news? What does he expect from us? Puff pieces like the ones Kristine Walsh is doing? She's covering this thing like she's their official spokeswoman, not a journalist. *Jesus H. Christ . . .*" Weinberg clenched his hand into a fist, looked at it, then turned away, his shoulders sagging.

"Ten seconds," came the disembodied director's voice.

* * *

Angela paced in front of the conference table where Roger a. arms folded. Jennifer stood by the portal, watching her expressionlessly, wishing the Commander hadn't requested her

presence.

"We simply *can't* allow any more media coverage like that Daltrey woman's broadcast this morning," Angela snarled. "We're having enough trouble with this damned city already."

"I agree," Roger said mildly. "But we've already taken steps. Diana approached Kristine Walsh yesterday, as scheduled. And the CBS network president came through just as we suggested."

Angela whirled to face her commanding officer. "Yes, but we wouldn't have had him to fall back on if / hadn't marked him as an ideal conversion subject back at the Mayor's party. Don't forget that, *Roger*."

The Commander stood abruptly, towering over the small blonde. "And my records give you full credit for your contribution," he said tightly. "I'm sure

there's no need to remind you that I'm the reason you've risen through the ranks as quickly as you have—the reason you were given this assignment as my second over officers with more time in service."

Angela lowered her eyes, realizing she'd gone too far. "I didn't intend to imply that I had forgotten, Roger. It's just that today's broadcast made me furious. I was just—how does the expression go—blowing off steam."

"Very well," Roger said, mollified. He turned to Jennifer, who was trying not to look at Angela, knowing how the latter—her superior officer—would react to Jennifer's witnessing her rebuke. "I called you in, Jennifer, to ask if you've completed your investigation of Denise Daltrey."

"Yes, Commander," Jennifer replied. "I don't think she's a candidate for a spokesperson slot. She's not the same kind of human as Kristine Walsh—I can't uncover any weaknesses significant enough to control her. In fact, I definitely recommend *against* approaching her with an offer similar to the one we made Walsh. My analysis indicates it would be rejected summarily, and it would cause unwelcome suspicion on Daltrey's part."

Roger nodded. "Very well. Let's see if our word with the

network president takes care of the situation before considering any direct action." His green eyes fixed on Angela's. "Satisfactory?"

"Yes, Commander," the blonde officer replied meekly, but Jennifer didn't miss the glance she cast at Roger's back as he turned away. Angela wasn't much of an actress at concealing her true thoughts . . .

Denise sat alone in her office, still smarting from the morning's meeting with the network president. A tuna on rye toast and a diet Pepsi rested in the white deli bag on her desk, but her stomach flipped over at the very notion of food. *The bastard*, she thought. *You'd have thought we'd done an expose on his favorite auntie's whorehouse. Why the hell did he take it so personally?*

She popped open the can of Pepsi and took a cautious sip. The liquid stayed in her stomach, so she took another sip, opening her desk drawer to get out a napkin. Her fingers encountered an edge of white envelope, and she tugged a

note out of the drawer, seeing her name written in her producer's familiar scrawl. "Hate to say it," the note read, "but I was righter than I knew. Walsh was named Visitor Spokesperson today. I must be psychic—now you know why I bet all the time. Should've put money on it *this* time. At least that way I'd have had something to comfort me while I barfed in disgust. Love and kisses, Winnie."

Denise balled the note up savagely, then prompted by an impulse she didn't care to examine too closely, she tore it into indecipherable shreds. *Something's going on here*, she thought, feeling her anger crystallize into resolution. *And whoever's behind it had better look out . . .*

Joey Vitale savored each and every moment he could spend on the grass and dirt of Yankee Stadium. For his father's generation, nothing could replace the old Brooklyn Dodgers, long gone to Los Angeles. But for Joey, born after the Dodgers had packed up and broken the hearts of baseball fans from Flatbush to Canarsie, and after that old bandbox called Ebbets Field had been bulldozed for a housing project, there was only one ballpark in his childhood dreams—the House that Ruth Built, nestled in a still-habitable corner of the South Bronx.

The presence of the stadium and its baseball dynasty stood as a bulwark against the spreading urban decay that had swallowed most of the surrounding area, transforming a once-prosperous middle-class neighborhood into one of the poorest in the country.

That was the sociology of the place as related to Joey by Pete horsy the when the younger player had first joined the team. Joey had grown up in the city, but when he was a kid, Yankee Stadium had been an isolated golden haven, a stop on the subway, or an exit off the Cross-Bronx Expressway when his pop would swallow his Yankee-hating pride and take his son to the games. The young player had never known what its surrounding neighborhood was like until Pete took him for a drive through streets that could have been transplanted from World War Two Europe—hollow-eyed shells of once-grand apartment houses, rubble-strewn, often-charred lots that resembled Hiroshima ground zero where jobless teenagers hunched against boarded-up storefronts and where faded and near-indecipherable signs above the doors gave mute evidence that commerce had once existed in this desolation.

Pete's accompanying lecture about social responsibility had made its mark—

Joey had vowed never to let his own Brooklyn neighborhood suffer a like fate and had eagerly volunteered for every community-service project he could squeeze in, often contributing money as well as his time to programs that benefited greatly from the backing of a major-league star.

Pete Forsythe took part in many of Joey's projects—a sizable chink in his cynicism-plated armor. He covered his own philanthropy by disclaiming, "Y'know, kid, this won't make a damn bit of difference in the long run. In a hundred years who'll know?" Then he'd add, "But we've got to do it anyway—keeps us off the streets, at least."

Pete called *that* existentialism. Joey wasn't sure what the word meant, but wasn't troubled by it. What he understood was that his friend Pete was a nice guy, but didn't want people finding that out.

All of his memories and thoughts about Yankee Stadium and its environs became excess baggage, quickly dismissed, as Joey drove into sight of the graceful white stadium. He parked his car quickly in the guarded, fenced-in lot, leaped out, slammed the door, and began to trot through the runway to the clubhouse. His feet thudded faster and faster until he was fairly flying past the blur of the halls, then the dugout—

He stopped abruptly, his eyes taking in the emerald green of the real grass, the rich brown of the infield dirt. *No artificial turf for this ballplayer!* Joey sniffed luxuriously, glorying in the smell and feel of this, his home territory. It was great to have a reason to be back.

Today was the first meeting of the Visitor Friends group Alexander Garr had arranged with Angela. Joey, Pete, and Bobby Neal were joined by a few other players who lived in the immediate area, under the supervision of "Field Marshal" Garr. The team owner, having committed himself to the enterprise, was determined that everything run smoothly.

About two hundred children and teenagers gathered in the field-level box seats behind first base. Garr was all decked out in a dark-blue Yankees warm-up suit as he addressed them from a mike on the dugout roof. He explained the ground rules—orderly behavior and good manners were essential, and everyone would get to talk to the Visitors and examine the squad vehicles.

"And Angela has promised," Garr concluded, "that if everyone behaves themselves—and I stress that *if*, kids—then we'll split into groups, ride up in the squad vehicles, and get a special tour of the Mother Ship!"

The group let out a chorus of wild cheers until a single, high-pitched voice overtopped them: "Look! Here they come!"

Garr was easily as excited as the youngsters as they watched four squad vehicles swoop toward the stadium and settle effortlessly onto the outfield grass.

It all went surprisingly smoothly. The kids were divided into groups, each one with two players as "platoon leaders." (Garr couldn't resist military terminology.) Each squad vehicle had a dozen or so Visitors aboard, more than enough to answer the barrages of questions, leaving a few free to stand beside the squad vehicles, keeping a watchful eye on the proceedings.

"It's a good thing they don't have hubcaps on those things," Pete whispered to Joey as their group edged around the outside of the Visitor vehicle. "Did you notice that Alex managed to snare some of the really hard-core gang members?"

"So?"

"So I suspect they would just as soon *strip* a squad vehicle as take a ride in it."

"Give 'em a break, Pete. Some events are so exciting they transcend established patterns of behavior."

Pete stepped back, his lips pursed in a soundless whistle. " 'Transcend established patterns of behavior.' What the hell did you do, swallow a dictionary?"

"A book I've been reading," Joey said proudly. "*Thirty Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary*."

"Hmm." Pete regarded his friend thoughtfully. "Marianne been on your mind lately?"

Vitale scuffled his Adidas into the turf. "Wel-1-1 ... I figured maybe I didn't stack up so hot in the brains department next to those guys in grad school, so I

thought, uh—"

"Excuse me," interrupted a tentative female voice—a Visitor voice.

Joey turned to see a tall young woman with chestnut hair waving gently down to her shoulders and the most incredibly long-lashed gray-blue eyes he'd ever seen.

"Forget the college girl," Pete whispered to him, then moved away to follow the tour. The Visitor woman was still looking at Joey, making him flush.

"Uh—um, hi," was all he could come up with. He felt like an idiot.

"My name is Lisa," she said.

It dawned on Joey after a second that he was staring. Almost all the Visitors were physically attractive—watching them troop out of the shuttles at the Brooklyn plant had been like watching a coed beauty contest. But Lisa—Joey couldn't stop thinking that she might be *the* most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. He let his eyes trail down, and it immediately occurred to him that this was not a smart way to get his mind off her looks. Her red coverall was fitted snugly enough to make him wonder what she'd look like in a bikini ... or out of one. Joey swallowed, searching his mind for something to say.

"What's yours?" she prompted.

"Mine?" he asked numbly. Higher thought processes gradually revived in his brain. "Um, my name? It's . . . uh . . . Joey. Joey Vitale."

Her face registered no change except that her smile widened as she bobbed her head. Joey stared at her. "You don't know who I am?"

She shook her head, a bit embarrassed. "I'm sorry, should

I?"

"Well, no, not really, I guess. It's just that your people seemed to know all about us, and the stadium ..." He shrugged. "But actually I guess it's pretty silly to expect you to know the names of individual baseball players."

"You play . . . baseball?" she pronounced the word carefully. "Is that a musical instrument, a baseball?"

Joey laughed and Lisa's face fell, leaving him feeling like a jerk. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to laugh at you. No, baseball is a sport. A . . . physical activity. Didn't they tell you what Yankee Stadium is used for?"

"I missed the briefing, I'm afraid. I was doing some special research for Jennifer. I know what sports are, though. Games, right?"

"Yeah. Baseball is the game we play here."

"What else do you do?" asked Lisa.

"What else?" Joey's mind seemed to be embedded in quick-drying cement.

"Yes, for an occupation. Your work."

"Oh, baseball *is* my occupation, my job. I get paid for it."

Lisa looked doubtful. "You get paid to play a game?"

Joey chuckled. "Yeah. Sometimes I have trouble believin' it myself, that they pay me to do what I like doing most of all." He found it singularly refreshing to talk to someone who'd never even *heard* of baseball—someone who had no idea that he had made nearly a million this season. He grinned at her. "Uh, what was it you wanted to ask me?"

"Nothing in particular. I just thought I'd say hello. The whole idea of these gatherings is for your people and mine to get to know each other, and I'm very interested in your culture." She dropped those incredibly long lashes. "You looked like a nice person to talk to."

Joey grinned. "Well, I'm sure glad you did. It's a great idea, your people and mine getting to know each other better." He put his hand on her arm, leading over toward the monuments and plaques in center field, commemorating baseball greats like Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and Mickey Mantle. "C'mon over here, and I'll tell you about baseball."

"I'd like that," she said.

"And I thought New York Hospital-Cornell University Medical Center could never sink lower than having taken in the Shah of Iran," Dr. Mary Chu announced as she marched into George Stewart's office like a tiny, black-haired tornado. She planted herself on the corner of his desk and glared at Stewart, who peered over his reading glasses at her.

"The man was sick," he said mildly. "What are you raging about now, Mary?"

"I just came from that so-called introductory lecture given by these Visitor characters, telling us what these seminars of theirs will be about. Advanced scientific knowledge, high-tech breakthroughs—my *ass*!"

Stewart craned his neck for an obvious peek at her bottom. "Doesn't look high-tech to me."

She shook her head. "Very funny, George. But making me laugh will *not* make me forget how insulted I feel. Those smooth-talking creeps fed us pure, unadulterated *pabulum*. They were vague and evasive—"

"Like my students on their last anatomy exam."

"Still won't work, George. And the way they delivered this so-called information! Well, my God almighty, I've seen first-year med students give more comprehensive, better thought-out lectures. Just who the hell do these guys think they're trying to fool?" She flung herself down in the chair beside his desk, her dark eyes glaring stormily into his. The early November cold and anger had brought up the red in her cheeks—she looked more like a student than a full professor. Her white lab coat contrasted with her bright-red sweater, plaid wraparound skirt, and penny loafers.

Stewart folded his hands on the desk, considering her words seriously. "What are you saying, Mary? That they really *don't* intend to share their advanced knowledge with us as they promised?"

"It's not just what I'm *saying*, George," Dr. Chu said. "Check out the facts, my friend. They postponed the damned thing *twice*—then when they finally give it, it's a total waste. Are you going to tell me that's being up front and

forthcoming?"

Stewart held up a placating hand. "No, I'm not going to do any such thing. I've known you too long to argue with you when you're in your dragon lady *persona*."

She broke up completely at his words, laughing so helplessly that for a moment he was afraid she might have succumbed to hysteria. But that *wasn't* Mary Chu's style. "What's so funny?" he asked.

"Speaking of the dragon lady, she's struck again." Mary held her fingers up and wiggled them, showing off her very long, impeccably manicured nails. "If what I did works, you're going to have to eat every sneering remark you've ever made about my fingernails."

"No!" he exclaimed in mock horror. "How could I go on without looking forward to razzing you about being Ms. Fu Manchu?"

"Old, George, very old, your jokes. But as a matter of fact, I *did* use them as scientific research tools today."

"How?"

"When I shook hands with one of those Visitor characters, I—ahem—*accidentally* jabbed him hard enough to scrape some of the skin off his hand, right under the ol' Fu Manchus. I mumbled an abject apology, of course, sorry for being so clumsy, etcetera, but it was the damndest thing—he didn't seem to even notice!"

"Did you draw blood?"

"I doubt it, but I came close. If I'd done it to *you*, you'd have yelped, or *something*, but he didn't even blink. And another thing—those Visitors are cold-skinned characters. Temperature at least five to ten degrees below ours. Frankly, he didn't feel much warmer than the air temperature aboard that damned ship of theirs."

"What did you do then?"

"Avoided touching anything else with that hand and raced back to my lab. Sure enough, there were scrapings under three nails, and I set up slides."

George snorted. "And to think you really had me convinced you were pissed off, when you're actually so pleased with yourself you're practically humming the Hallelujah Chorus."

"I *was* pissed off," Mary said defensively. "Still am—to think those guys think we're suckers enough to buy the bill of goods they're trying to push on us. 'Share the fruits of all our knowledge,'—*horseshit*"

"What are you going to do now?"

"Take you back to the lab with me to take the first look-see at those slides. I've got a feeling we may be on the track of something big."

Stewart checked his watch. "Damn! I'd love to, Mary, you've really got my curiosity raging, but I've got to be downstairs in about two minutes. I've got a CAT-scan scheduled for the Johnson boy, and I promised his parents I'd be there. Then I've got a couple of late appointments at my home office."

Mary nodded. "I understand. But I'm going to start without you."

"Let me know what you find," he said. "You can reach me here until about four, then I'll be home. I'll take a look first thing tomorrow."

"*If* I can squeeze you in," she said airily, buffing the infamous nails on her lab jacket. She rose to her feet and struck a pose on her way to the door. "By then, my fame and detective exploits ought to have spread so far you'll have to take a number and get on line to see those slides."

"Did I ever tell you you're probably certifiable?" Stewart said, beginning to laugh.

"Continually. Ta-ta, George—I'm off to make my name in science!"

Stewart chuckled as he straightened his tie and put on his lab coat, watching his

friend as she waltzed out the door and threw him a last wave. Her gleaming fingertips were the last things to disappear into the hall.

It was dark out when the last patient left Stewart's home office. He finished up the paperwork, shooed his receptionist on her way home, and locked the downstairs office door. As he started up the inside steps to his living room, he felt bone-weary—something he'd been noticing more and more lately. Maybe Lauren was right. Maybe he should think about cutting down.

Halfway up the staircase, the phone rang. Go up or down to answer it? If he went down, he'd only have to reascend the lower steps—might as well finish the journey up. He got to the phone on its sixth ring and had to catch his breath to say hello.

"George," said Mary's voice. "It's me. Can you get back over here right away?"

All his strength seemed to drain away at the thought of leaving the light and warmth of home for the streets again. A fatigue headache throbbed inexorably at the back of his head. "Is it the slides?" he asked. "Can't it wait till tomorrow, Mary? I'm beat."

"George." She was deadly serious under the bantering tone. "Are you getting senile on me? If you are, then wait a while, 'cause I *really* need you to see this. Wear two pairs of socks— what I've just looked at is gonna knock one pair right off."

"What the hell did you find?"

"I can't say. I've probably said too much already over the phone. I'm gonna lock the door till you get here," she said darkly, and he could tell she wasn't kidding at all.

"All right," he said. "I'm leaving now. Sit tight."

"Hurry *up*, George. G'bye."

Snatching a couple of Reese's cups out of a candy dish, George Stewart grabbed his coat and headed out to find a cab.

The taxi stopped outside the hospital gates on York Avenue, and Stewart got out. The air seemed colder here along the East River. He didn't know if it was this making him shiver or Mary Chu's chilling words replaying in his head. There'd been a shakiness in her voice. In the twelve years he'd known her, he'd never heard her sound like that before. He walked quickly up the driveway and into the medical center.

The corridors went by in a blur as he munched on his last peanut-butter cup. Halfway down the final hall, he saw light spilling from the open door of Mary Chu's lab, and the candy seemed to stick halfway down. Telling himself she'd heard him coming and opened the door, he called out softly, "Mary? It's George."

He suddenly realized that silence could be an ugly noise.

Quiet-footed, he went to the doorway and paused. His breath came out in a painful whoosh as he took in the scene— lab stools on their sides, a tossed salad of papers and broken test tubes scattered across the floor tiles. Mary's expensive microscope lay on its back on the floor, its black base sticking out like the stiff legs of a dead animal.

Stewart's mind flashed back to the time his Harlem office had been burglarized. It had been years ago, over a Fourth of July weekend when he and his family had gone to the mountains. After the break-in, the neighborhood had organized an informal watch over his brownstone. They'd wanted Doc Stewart to stay, and had protected him ever since. He was a precious commodity, someone who knew their names and laces, who'd say hello in the street, who'd help in the middle of the night when a worried mother would call.

But no one had protected Mary Chu, and Stewart felt a sudden, intense grief. He looked carefully at the lock on the door, not touching it, but could see no signs of tampering. He reached for her phone to call security, but stopped. If this break-in had anything to do with the Visitor skin samples—and it beggared coincidence to suppose it *didn't*—he ought to search for signs of Mary's notes and slides, for surely the [H]lice wouldn't allow him to remove anything once they arrived.

Carefully, using a tongue depressor to lift the papers, he began sifting through the chaos on the floor.

Fifteen minutes of searching convinced him that there was 110 more sign of Dr. Chu's detective work than there was of Mary herself. His hands shaking, he dialed security.

There was nothing in the morning paper, no report whatsoever about the break-in. At his hospital office, George Stewart dug patiently through his *New York Times*, but the disappearance of one of the city's most prominent physicians and researchers evidently wasn't considered fit news to print. Not even a tiny mention buried on page forty-seven. Nothing, not a damn thing.

He dialed the hospital's security office. "Can I speak with Mr. Kolker, please?" He sipped at his coffee. "Yes, I can hold."

He was halfway through his cup when a distinctly Brooklyn voice graveled in his ear. "Yes, Mr. Kolker, this is Doctor George Stewart. I was the one who reported the disturbance in Doctor Mary Chu's laboratory last evening, as well as the disappearance of Doctor Chu herself. I was wondering what you'd managed to uncover."

"Not much, Doctor Stewart," said the voice in his ear. It pronounced his name "Stoo-it." "We don't even know if she was here last night."

"Now just a minute," George said. "I know for a fact she was working late. She called me from her lab and asked me to come see her. That was about seven-thirty. I got there about eight, and I found her lab ransacked. I explained all this to the officer who was up there last night. Myers, that was his name."

"Yeah, I got his report here. But the fact is, no one saw her after she said she was goin' out for a sandwich about five-thirty. Maybe you were mistaken—maybe she called you from home."

"I tried her home. All night. She hasn't been there. I went over there after I left Myers, and her mail hadn't been picked up. She didn't go home."

"Well, Doc, I really don't know what to tell you. We're just an internal security staff. All we found was a mess in her lab. Hell, I've seen labs that looked worse when a strong wind blew through 'em."

"Except for the microscope," George said, his voice tight. "Nobody tosses an

instrument worth that much on the floor."

"Yeah, I'll grant you it's strange. But I'm no Dick Tracy. We reported the incident to N.Y.P.D. It's in their hands now,"

"All right, I'll talk to them." Stewart hung up. The coffee sloshed acidly in his stomach.

A few minutes later he hung up again, stymied. It seemed that a person had to be missing at least twenty-four hours before the police would even take a report—what a mess!

He thought hard for a few moments, then reached for the phone once more, dialing 411. When the information operator's voice rang tinnily in his ear, he poised his pencil. "May I have the number of *The New York Times*, please?"

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